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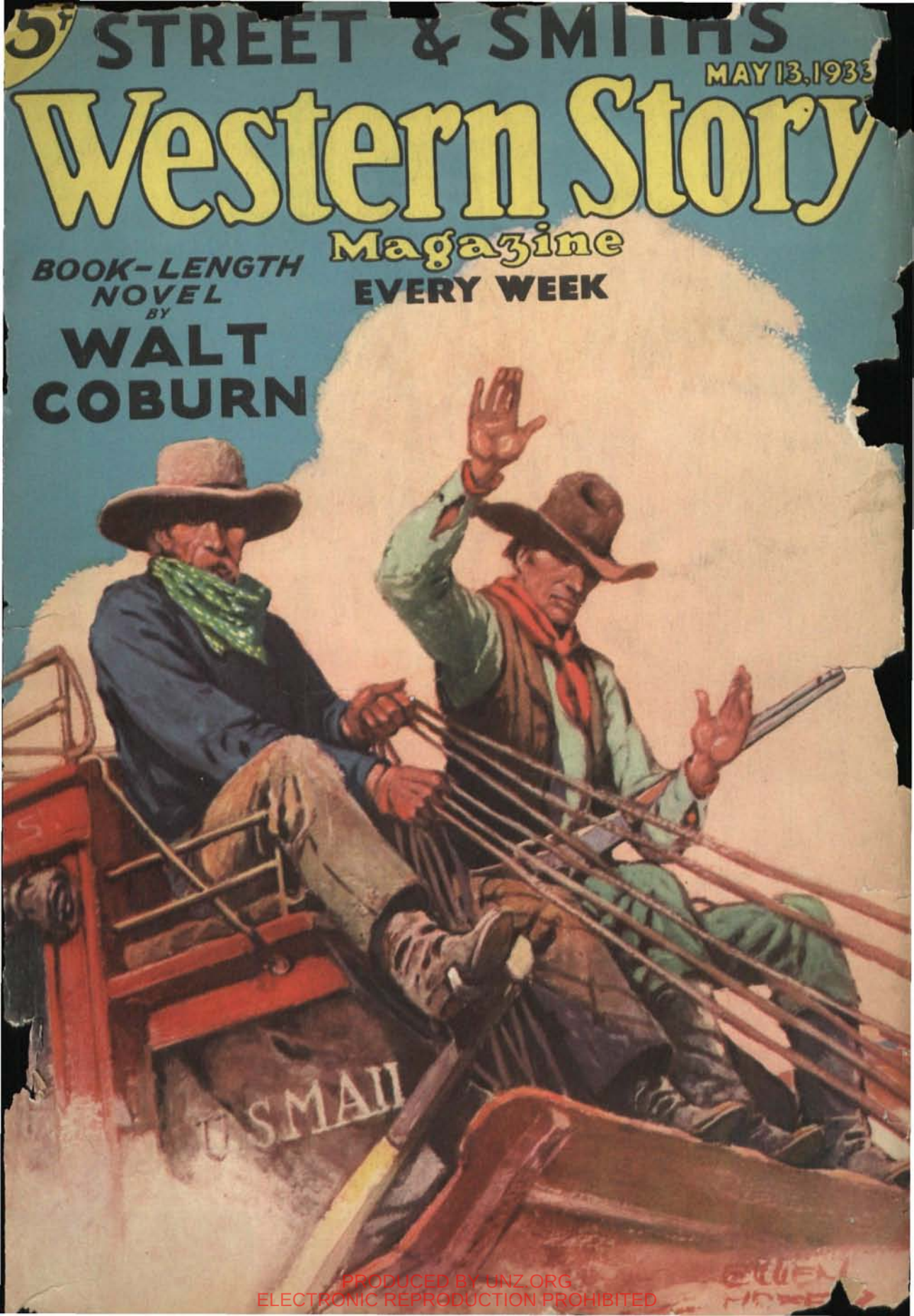
STREET & SMITH'S

MAY 13, 1933

Western Story Magazine

EVERY WEEK

BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL BY WALT COBURN



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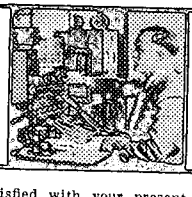
Many Make $50 to $100 a Week

J. E. Smith, Pres., Nat'l Radio Institute, the man who has directed the Home Study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

I'll Train You at Home in Your Spare Time for RADIO · TELEVISION · TALKING MOVIES

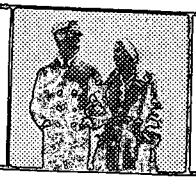
Set Servicing

Spare-time set servicing pays many N.R.I. men $200 to $1,000 a year. Full-time men make as much as $65, $75, and $100 a week.



Broadcasting Stations

Employ trained men continually for jobs paying up to $5,000 a year.



Ship Operating

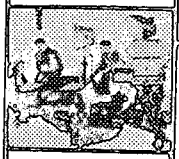
Radio operators on ships see the world free and get good pay plus expenses. Here's one enjoying shore leave.

Aircraft Radio

Aviation is needing more and more trained Radio men. Operators employed through Civil Service Commission earn $1,620 to $2,800 a year.

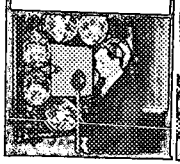
Talking Movies

An invention made possible by Radio. Employs many well-trained Radio men for jobs paying $75 to $200 a week.



Television

The coming field of many great opportunities is covered by my course.



If you are dissatisfied with your present job. If you are struggling along in a rut with little or no prospect of anything better than a skinny pay envelope—clip the coupon NOW. Get my big FREE book on the opportunities in Radio. Read how quickly you can learn at home in your spare time to be a Radio Expert—what good jobs my graduates have been getting—real jobs with real futures.

Many Radio Experts Ma[illegible]0 a Week

In about ten years the Radio [illegible] has grown from $2,000,000 to hundreds of millions of dollars. Over 300,000 jobs have been created by this growth, and thousands more will be created by its continued development. Many men and young men with the right training—the kind of training I give you in the N.R.I. course—have stepped into Radio at two and three times their former salaries.

Get Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Broadcasting stations use engineers, operators, station managers, and pay up to $5,000 a year. Manufacturers continually employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, service men, buyers, for jobs paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships enjoy life, see the world, with board and lodging free, and get good pay besides. Dealers and jobbers employ service men, salesmen, buyers, managers, and pay up to $100 a week. My book tells you about these and many other kinds of interesting Radio jobs.

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The day you enroll with me I send you material which you should master quickly for doing 28 jobs common in most every neighborhood for spare-time money. Throughout your course I send you information on servicing popular makes of sets! I give you the plans and ideas that have made $200 to $1,000 a year for N.R.I. men in their spare time. My course is famous as the course that pays for itself.

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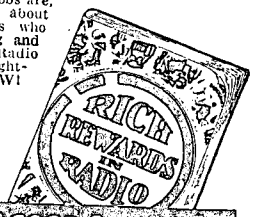
Get your copy today. It's free to all residents of the United States and Canada over 15 years old. It tells you where Radio's good jobs are, what they pay, tells you about my course, what others who have taken it are doing and making. Find out what Radio offers you without the slightest obligation. ACT NOW!



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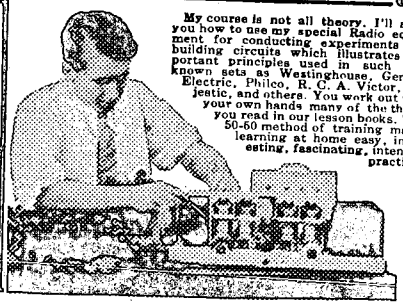

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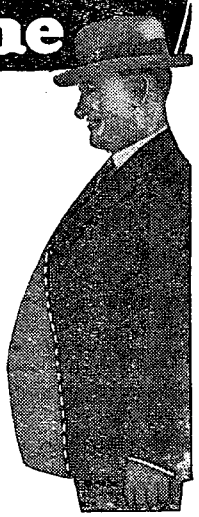
8 Inches Off Waistline



READ WHAT WEARERS SAY

"My waistline went from 42 down to 34 inches. It took only 35 days," says E. D. Lane of Albany, N. Y.

"I received my belt last Monday," writes S. L. Brown, Trenton, N. J. "I feel 15 years younger; no more tired and bloated feelings after meals."

"I was 44 inches around the waist—now down to 37½—feel better—constipation gone—and know the belt has added years to my life."—D. W. Bilderback, Wichita.

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Break Constipation Habit

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This remarkable belt improves your appearance the moment you put it on. Note how much better your clothes fit and look without a heavy waistline to pull them out of shape.

See how naturally and comfortably you attain a more erect carriage and enjoy a new feeling of ease and comfort and lightness when the overworked abdominal muscles are properly supported. Director puts snap in your step, helps to relieve "shortness of breath," renews your vigor. You look and feel 10 years younger.

Loose, fallen abdominal muscles go back where they belong. Then the movements of your body cause a gentle, changing pressure on the abdomen, bringing results similar to regular massage. Thus, Director aids nature to promote regularity without the use of harsh, irritating cathartics.

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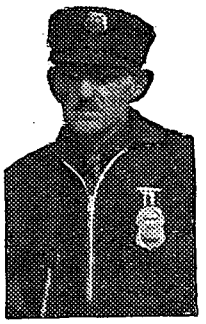
STOMACH DISORDERS THREATEN HIS LIFE SAYS N. Y. PATROLMAN

"I tried everything," says Officer David R. Caldwell, 2309 Holland Ave., New York City. "I suffered from gas in the stomach and heartburn so bad that I could hardly stand it. My case was diagnosed by one doctor as ulcers, another said I had gall stones. One went so far as to tell my wife that I had cancer and had only a short time to live. I suffered much agony and lost weight until one day I saw an advertisement in the New York Daily News, by the Udga Co., St. Paul, Minn. I wrote for their treatment and thanks be to God I did, for today I am a different man. I have no pain, can eat anything and I am getting back to my normal weight."



DAVID R. CALDWELL

Acid Stomach Afflicts Millions

Hyperacidity (acid stomach), is, as every physician can tell you, the curse of millions. It is the most common cause of stomach or gastric ulcers as well as many other distressing conditions and there are comparatively few adults who can truly say it has never troubled them. **In addition to stomach ulcers, acid stomach is often the direct cause of gas pains, dyspepsia, poor digestion, pains after eating, bloating, belching, gnawing pains, heartburn, gastritis, sour stomach, constipation, etc.**

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Publication issued every week by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Ormond G. Smith, President; George C. Smith, Vice President and Treasurer; George C. Smith, Jr., Vice President; Ormond V. Gould, Secretary. Copyright, 1933, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., New York. Copyright, 1933, by Street & Smith Publications, Inc., Great Britain. Entered as Second-class Matter, September 4, 1917, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under Act of Congress of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions to Cuba, Dom. Republic, Haiti, Spain, Central and South American Countries except The Guianas and British Honduras, $7.00 per year. To all other Foreign Countries, including The Guianas and British Honduras, $9.00 per year.

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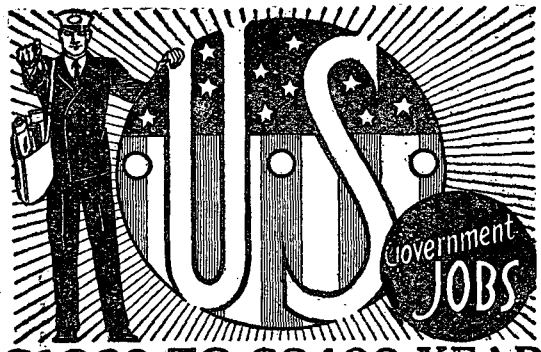

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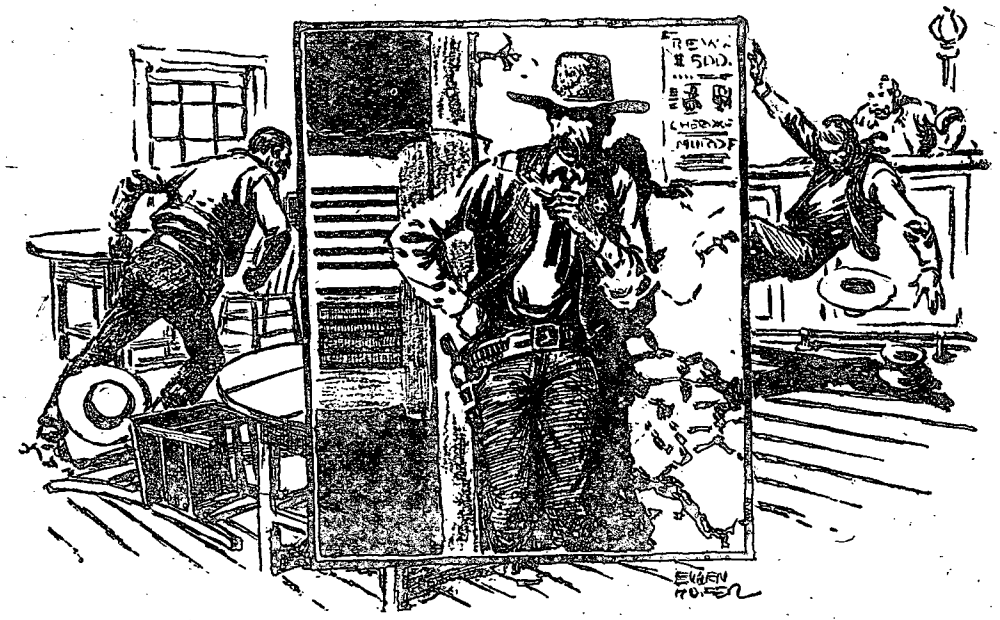

THE GUILTY SHERIFF

By C. WILES HALLOCK

"PIEBALD" CANARKY, our tough county sheriff,
Fearless defender of justice and law,
Swore he'd imprison his own son and heir—if
Fate ever dealt him a mandate so raw.
"I play no fav'rites, no matter what chances!
Hew to the line, that's my motter!" he'd say.
"Duty is duty, in *all* circumstances;
As to the chips—let 'em fall where they may!"

One day the sheriff and Sheep-herder Dowdy
Had 'em a fracas along about noon;
Wrangled and battled uproar'ous and rowdy
Over to "Slim Jim's" Oasis Saloon.
Terrible set-to it was, while it lasted;
Both men was stubborn, enduring, and hale;
But when the scrappers was plumb flabbergasted,
Sheriff Canarky took Dowdy to jail.

Next day in justice court, handcuffed together,
Sheriff Canarky and Dowdy appeared.
"Jedge," said the sheriff, "I never pull leather!
Always to duty I've strictly adhered.
Waal, here's a case of the State versus Dowdy—
Also Canarky—disturbin' the peace.
Being but human, I'm apt to get rowdy;
But—being sheriff—I don't ask release.

"Being the *sheriff*, I duly arrested
Dowdy for causing the fight which befell;
Being *Canarky*, which also contested,
Jedge, I arrested *my own self*, as well!"
"What are you pleading?" asked Justice McCarty.
"*Guilty*!" the sheriff and Dowdy replied.
"Each five and costs!" said the judge, laughing hearty.
"This is the *queerest* case ever I tried!"

"I play no fav'rites, no matter what chances,"
Muttered the sheriff, defraying his fine;
"Duty is duty, in *all* circumstances;
I don't pull leather—I hew to the line!"

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ROPE LAW

By WALT COBURN

Author of "The Burnt Ranch," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THREATS.

ACCORDING to the Montana law of metes and bounds, big Bob Rutledge was measuring off the boundary lines of his cattle ranch—one hundred thousand acres of Montana's finest cattle country. Starting from the landmark known as Rutledge Butte, the party headed southward toward the bad lands of the Missouri River. Bob Rutledge and his foreman, a lanky Texan named Ab Adams, did the measuring on horseback, employing a fifty-foot reata instead of a surveyor's chain, using landmarks for sights, now and then building a rock monument to fix the boundary line.

With big Bob Rutledge and Ab Adams rode Will Sheppard, the cattleman's attorney. Behind, with the pack outfit, rode Brad Rutledge, Bob's only son, and a giant Negro called "Chalk." Their job was to bring along the pack horses and build the rock monuments. Will Sheppard carried a map and a quart bottle of whisky.

"We head south from here," Bob Rutledge told Sheppard as they con-

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sulted the government map, "as far as where Beef Crick empties into the Missouri. Then eastward to the mouth o' Sand Crick, follerin' the Missouri River. North from the mouth o' Sand Crick to the Injun Rock, and then due west to Rutledge Butte. Measurin' 'er off with this rawhide reata that I fetched from Texas. Shep, ten years from now I'll own this whole county and make my own laws. I'll be cattle king o' Montana."

Bob Rutledge was a big, square-featured man with tawny hair and mustache now turning gray. He had cold gray-blue eyes and a drawling voice. He towered above the slender, thin-faced Will Sheppard, who was rated as the sharpest land attorney and criminal lawyer in the country.

Will Sheppard might have been forty or sixty. He looked tubercular, and his face was colorless. He had a habit of lifting his left eyebrow and the left corner of his mouth. His eyes were bright-blue, shrewd, yet with a humorous twinkle. Never sober, seldom drunk, except after he had finished a difficult case in court, he was known as Bob Rutledge's right-hand bower. They had come together from California —Bob Rutledge with his fifty-foot reata and cedar-handled Colts, Will Sheppard with his bottle of whisky and a dingy law library loaded on a pack mule.

"The cattle king o' Montana, Shep," repeated Bob Rutledge, with a sweep of his hard-muscled arm. "I'll own it all."

"Not for anything in the world, Robert," said Will Sheppard, his left eyebrow quirking, "would I dash cold water upon the fire of your dreams, but remember this fact: Inside this boundary line is land that we're taking up that may later be contested. I seem to foresee the day, Robert, when you'll need me to keep you from going to prison."

"I'm takin' this land legal. Desert claims, scrip. Every man I got workin' for me is takin' up land. I'll buy it off 'em. Shep, yuh talk like a loco sheep-herder."

"I know Montana law, Robert. Government law. State law. And I'm telling you that some day I'll work myself to death to save your thick neck. Drink, Robert?" Will Sheppard was the only man who ever called Bob Rutledge "Robert."

AB ADAMS, whom Will Sheppard referred to as Robert's left-hand bower, rode up, dragging the rawhide reata. Ab was a lean, leathery man with black eyes and graying black hair. He was rated as one of the best cowmen who had ever come up the trail, also as a fast gun fighter. He pulled the back of a gloved hand across his thin-lipped mouth and took the bottle out of Will Sheppard's hand. Bob Rutledge grinned widely.

The big cattleman never went anywhere without Ab Adams or Chalk as a bodyguard, because in Texas, Bob Rutledge had been mixed up in one of the bloodiest range wars ever fought. He had left there with Chalk and Ab Adams and the motherless Brad, then a small boy. Behind them were the fresh graves of the rest of the Rutledge tribe, also more than a few graves filled by the Taylor Banning clan. And since word had come out of Texas that Taylor Banning was still alive, Bob Rutledge never rode alone, because Taylor Banning came from a breed that never gives up a grudge.

Now Brad rode up, followed by the black giant, Chalk. A tall youth of twenty was Brad Rutledge, with the square, blunt features of his fa-

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ther. His eyes were more blue than gray, and he grinned easily. Brad was a good cowhand. And although he lacked the ruthless way of his father, he was never lacking in courage. Brad got forty a month, like the other common hands. Bob Rutledge didn't believe in spoiling his son. And he handled Brad with an iron hand.

Brad had never known any affection from his father. He reckoned Bob cared about him, but not like most fathers care for an only son. Chalk had always looked after Brad, and the boy had a lot of real affection for the black giant who loved to laugh and joke and dance jigs.

In Texas Chalk had been called "bad," and termed a ferocious killer. But Chalk had looked after Brad since he was a six-year-old youngster, running away from Texas and a burned home and the newly made grave that held his mother. Chalk worshiped Brad. They had fun together. But Brad had never shared a joke or a laugh with his father or the thin-lipped Ab Adams.

Will Sheppard was different. Shep had acted as both tutor and friend to the boy who saw little of schools as he and his father and Ab and Chalk and Will Sheppard drifted from one place to another—Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, California, where Bob Rutledge had made a huge fortune panning gold on Sutter Creek, then Nevada, where the gambling tables netted more yellow gold, and now to Montana. Always these men and the boy had traveled together. And Shep, through whose strange nature ran the whimsical streak of a dreamer and philosopher, spent long hours teaching Brad such things as Grammar, Latin, geometry, Shakespeare, and how to deal from the bottom of a deck of cards.

As the pack horses started grazing, the white men, the youth, and the Negro squatted on their heels in the shade of some big cottonwoods. They ate bread and cold meat and drank from the creek.

"Two horsebackers comin'," said Ab Adams, and his lean, clawlike hand loosened the gun in the holster tied to his thigh. "Bob, that un on the gray horse shore rides like Taylor Banning. And it is Taylor Banning." His gun slid from its holster. Chalk grinned and pulled a carbine from his saddle scabbard. But Bob Rutledge shook his head.

"I don't reckon they'll commence nothin', boys. Put up them guns. I'll meet 'em. Time enough to open up if I start shootin' their way."

Bob Rutledge stepped up on his horse and rode to meet the two men who were riding up the creek.

TAYOR and Tracy Banning were as alike as two peas, except that Taylor sat his horse different. Both were tall, spare of frame, with high cheek bones and aristocratic noses. Their eyes were dark, their hair coal-black, their skins almost swarthy. Perhaps somewhere in Virginia, from whence they had originally spring, there might have been an Indian strain in the blood. Though their father and mother had both been fair-skinned and light-haired, the sons were dark. Proud to the point of arrogance were the Bannings, of finer stock than the big-framed Bob Rutledge.

The feud ran back two generations, when a Major Banning, who had come to Texas to take up the cattle business, and a Captain Sam Rutledge, one of the hard-riding, fast-shooting raiders under Quantrell, had fought a duel over a girl. Both had been wounded. Both

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lived. And they both located along the Texas-Mexico border—Banning, from one of the finest families of Virginia; Rutledge, a hard-riding, swashbuckling adventurer from nowhere. And there they had married, raised families, and later took sides in the range war that soaked the soil of the Lone Star State with the blood of brave men. For neither the Bannings nor the Rutledges bred cowards.

Now big Bob Rutledge, riding a black gelding, rode to meet the twin Banning brothers.

Chalk, his eyes showing whitely, sat on his heels, his carbine across his lap. Ab Adams kept his hand on his six-gun. Brad looked at Will Sheppard, and Shep twisted his left eyebrow and the left corner of his mouth. Shep never packed a gun. Neither did Brad. Shep's eyes twinkled brightly, and he uncorked his bottle.

"If they open up the fireworks, Brad, we'll jump in the creek and hide under a cut bank. I've yet to find the use in carrying around a gun and pulling it out and shooting at people. Discretion is the better part of valor, Brad, and when guns go off, I run like a rabbit. I might some day be shot in the back, but never will Will Sheppard get shot facing any kind of firearms. Gun fighting is the pastime of fools. And while I don't deny being a rank coward, no man ever called me a fool.

"Look at Chalk. Nobody ever called him brainy. He'd rather be in a Mexican knife scrap than at a dance. Chalk's all heathen. As for the delightful Ab, past master of the art of gun fanning, I often wonder what life gives him in the way of pleasure. He don't ever smile. Never even enjoys a drink. If he ever cracked a joke, even a bad joke, he'd choke. And as for singing, he always somehow reminds me of a raven. Poe's raven—Nevermore. Fits him like a black shroud.

"And Robert rides forth to hold converse with the Bannings. Now take the Bannings. Great people. Breeding, education, refinement, all that. But gun toters. Hot-blooded. And some day they'll start in killing one another. Perhaps to-day. No, not to-day. Too many on the Rutledge side. A shortage of Banning guns." He lifted his bottle and sipped the raw whisky.

Bob Rutledge rode up within ten feet of the two Bannings.

"Yo're on my land," he told them, his voice harsh.

"Hardly, Rutledge. We're on land that you're claiming. But it's not your land." Tracy Banning's voice was tense. His dark eyes snapped. "You're marking off land that you're trying to steal. You're not going to get away with it."

"I reckon you aim tuh stop me?"

Taylor Banning smiled faintly. Taylor had the name of being the cooler-headed of the two.

"We aim to do our best to stop you from stealing land that belongs to the government, Rutledge. News reached Texas that you were going to be the cattle king of Montana. Tracy and I came from Texas to stop you from doing here what you tried to do in Texas."

"Whenever yuh feel lucky," said Bob Rutledge, sitting with his weight in his left stirrup, his hand on his six-gun, "open up the jack pot."

"When we start," said Tracy Banning, "we'll run you out of Montana like we ran you out of Texas. We're located on Antelope Creek. Our land joins yours. We rode here to tell you that we're going to hang that tough hide of yours on the fence. You can take back that mes-

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sage to Ab Adams and Chalk and that crooked shyster, Sheppard. Also to that son of yours. We're ridding Montana of all of you."

Big Bob Rutledge grinned contemptuously. "And yuh come all the way from Texas tuh try a whizzer like that, did yuh? Well, I'm located here now, and no man is goin' tuh run me off my ranch. You two snakes is on my land. Quirt them horses down the hind laigs and git off. And if ever I ketch yuh on my land again, I'll fill yuh both full o' lead. Git!"

Bob Rutledge sat his horse. The Bannings rode back along the trail. The big cattleman was grinning when he rejoined his outfit, but Will Sheppard read something in Bob Rutledge's gray-blue eyes that the others missed. The attorney cocked his left eyebrow and held out the bottle.

"You look like a stiff snort would do you good, Robert."

CHAPTER II.

A TOAST TO THE BLOCK R.

BOB RUTLEDGE had built himself a big log house with every convenience his money could buy. There were several bedrooms, each with a bath, and a long hallway. The place had hardwood floors, natural log walls, a huge rock fireplace, and pictures made by Montana's great artist, Charlie Russell. On the floor were the Indian-tanned hides of silvertip grizzlies. In front of the big fireplace was an Indian-tanned cowhide that wore Bob Rutledge's Block R brand.

When the party got home from the trip of measuring off the domain of the big cowman, Bob Rutledge drove a wooden peg into the log wall above the fireplace. On the wooden peg he hung the rawhide reata. Ab Adams, Brad, and Will Sheppard looked on. Chalk brought in a whisky decanter made of cut glass, and glasses of the same pattern. The whisky was twenty years old.

"As old as Brad," said Bob Rutledge as he filled the glasses.

Will Sheppard looked at the rawhide reata hanging on the peg above the rock fireplace. He did not seem to notice the drink at his elbow. Bob Rutledge poured Brad a drink. Ab Adams sat in his rawhide-seated chair, twisting his filled glass in his hand. Chalk stood behind Brad's chair, his black face unsmiling, a worried look in his eyes. Never before had Bob Rutledge ever given his son a drink. Bob Rutledge, standing before the fireplace on widespread legs, lifted his glass.

"Yuh'll drink to the Block R, gents," he said.

Will Sheppard got to his feet slowly. He took the filled glass from Brad's hand and tossed it into the fire. Then, his left eyebrow twisted upward, he smiled crookedly at Bob Rutledge.

"I'll do Brad's share of drinking, Robert."

Bob Rutledge tensed. His cold eyes were narrowed now. Brad was on his feet, white-lipped, fists clenched, as his father took a step toward the smiling Will Sheppard.

"Shep's right," said Brad in a husky voice. "I ain't drinkin'. Not now, or ever. You can't make me!"

As Adams moved a little in his chair. Bob Rutledge shifted his hard-eyed glare to his son. Brad stood there, firm on his feet, steady-eyed, between Will Sheppard and his father.

"I'm boss here," growled Bob Rutledge. "I'll skin alive the man that tries tuh cross me."

"Robert," said Will Sheppard,

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stepping around Brad, "nobody is hurting Brad. Take it out on me if you like, but leave Brad alone. If you don't, you'll regret it. Take a look at Chalk. Chalk would kill you or Ab Adams or any other man that laid a hand on Brad. I'd advise you to sit down."

Bob Rutledge looked from Will Sheppard to the white-lipped Brad, then at Chalk, who stood there, half crouched, his eyeballs like white marbles. Then he looked at Ab Adams. Ab lifted his glass.

"Here's how," said Ab Adams, and tossed off his drink. "If I was you, Bob, I'd set down. Shep is about right. If Brad don't like tuh drink, don't crowd 'im."

Chalk's hand came away from the bowie knife he always carried. He grinned widely.

"Robert," said Will Sheppard, "you're outvoted. Ab, my congratulations. From that barren heart of yours there sprouts the small but unmistakable branch of human understanding. A quality so long dormant that it——"

"Who asked you tuh make a speech?" cut in Ab Adams, reaching for the decanter.

"No one. No one, Abbie. Robert, your health. And may that rawhide reata never hang you."

"Meanin'," said Bob Rutledge, grinning faintly now, "just what, Shep?"

"Meaning, Robert, that better and worse men than Bob Rutledge have stretched rope. Rawhide rope. Some day you'll need me badly. Badly. So I'll advise you not to rub me out. Abilene Adams may also need me. Dwell upon that thought, Brother Abbie. As for Chalk, who knows? Eh, Chalk? But I'd go as far, yea, and a mile farther, for you than any man I know save Brad Rutledge. Robert, I'd enjoy the mate to this libation I've just surrounded and conquered.

"And now, gentlemen, a toast to our future cattle king of Montana. Brad, drink it with creek water out of yonder bucket. We drink standing, gentlemen, to the health, the success, and the eternal prosperity of a man who once saved my life. A man who is, in spite of himself, my friend. I give you Bob Rutledge, the bravest man I have ever known—and the most ruthless enemy that ever a man could wish for. Here's howdy, Robert."

A strange bond of friendship tied together Bob Rutledge and Will Sheppard. No man save the two knew its beginning, its strength.

When they had emptied their glasses, Bob Rutledge held out his hand. Behind his grin, behind the cold light in his eyes, was something that only Will Sheppard could understand.

"Shake, Shep."

And later that evening Bob Rutledge and Will Sheppard sat alone in that same room. They sat talking until dawn. In the end Bob Rutledge again put out his hairy paw.

"Yuh'll take care of Brad in case they git me?"

"You don't need to ask that, Robert. I can only hope that, when they get you, they won't get Brad."

"Or you, Shep."

"Or me, Robert."

IT had rained for three days and nights. The creeks were bank full. Brad Rutledge, leading circle, had dropped his cowboys off in pairs to gather the cattle out of the rough bad lands. Slickers were dripping. The red and yellow and gray mud was balling the feet of the horses. The sky was the color of lead. Brad, riding alone, swung

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up Antelope Creek to finish the circle, and then cut across to where the cattle would be gathered.

Antelope Creek was a mud-colored, foam-spotted torrent, there where the cottonwoods grew and the grass was stirrup-high. The rain beat into Brad's face, and he rode hunched over the saddle horn, hat pulled low. His horse knew the way, and he let the big bay gelding travel on a slack rein.

Then, out of that gray mist and rain, out of that silence, came the terrified cry of a woman.

Brad jerked erect. Fifty yards upstream he saw a horse in the creek. The horse was pawing madly at the muddy water. Then he caught a glimpse of a girl's head, below the horse. Brad knew how horses acted in swimming water. He knew that the fear-stricken animal would paw down the girl. Those shod hoofs, in their maddened effort to find foothold, would beat down the girl, who had struck out for the bank of the creek, trying to fight the swirling current.

Brad jerked his rope free and spurred the big bay into the creek. The bay gelding was a good water horse, and Brad knew how to handle it in swimming water. They were between the girl and the other horse now. Brad threw her the rope. She clutched at it, missed. He called out to her and made another throw. This time she caught the rope.

"Hang on!" called Brad. "I'm givin' you a tow. Water wet?" And his grin took some of the panic out of her heart, for she managed a faint reply.

"It's damp, cowboy!"

"Hang an' rattle," he called back; then, as he saw the girl's horse headed for them, he tied his rope hard and fast to the saddle horn.

"Hang onto that rope, lady. Mahogany will pull yuh ashore. I'll git that horse of yours." He looked at the white-faced girl and grinned. "Savvy, lady?"

"I'll hang and rattle," she called to him.

Brad quit his horse. Now he was in behind the girl's horse. Then alongside, slapping water into the face of the swimming animal. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his big bay Mahogany drag the girl ashore. He saw her try to stand on her feet, then go down in a wilted heap. A few moments later he had fought her horse ashore and sloshed through the mud to where she lay. He was chilled to the bone, and his lungs were half full of water, which he coughed up. Down across his face was a ragged cut where a shod hoof had grazed his head.

The girl's face was blue and pinched with cold. She looked dead, but her pulse was beating slowly. Brad had some dry matches in a tobacco can. Building a fire in the rain was no easy job, but he managed it after using up half his matches. He got a good fire going, then made clumsy first-aid efforts to revive the girl.

It was some fifteen minutes before his efforts were rewarded. Then he remembered a bottle of whisky in his saddle pocket that belonged to Shep. He forced some of it down the girl's throat, but it almost choked her. She fought him off blindly, then opened her eyes.

"Take 'er easy, lady. I was just tryin' tuh git a drink down yuh. Take a swaller. Yuh look peaked."

"Thanks. You're the first man that ever called me peaked. You're the cowboy that threw me the rope."

"Don't talk now, lady. Take a big swaller of this whisky."

"I never drink." She pushed aside the bottle.

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"Then I'll have tuh pour it down yuh," said Brad, "because it's medicine, and yuh need it. I don't drink either, but I'm takin' a jolt of it. Even Shep wouldn't mind, considerin'. Gosh, I bet I pumped a gallon o' that crick water outta yuh. And yo're blue around the gills. Swaller, now. That's it. Now I'll try some. Nope, even Shep wouldn't mind us takin' whisky, considerin'."

HE put more wood on the fire, and they sat on a cottonwood log beside the warming blaze. The color was coming back into the girl's face, and she smiled a little. Brad saw that she had hazel eyes and a firm little mouth and copper-colored hair. He bet himself that she was mighty pretty if she got thawed out and dried out. They sat there on the log. She was dressed in cowboy clothes, and looked like a slim boy. They poured the water out of their boots, and Brad piled more wood on the fire. It had begun to clear up. The rain was a thin mist now. The fire was warming them.

"Feel better, lady?"

"Lots better. How are you?"

"Me? Shucks, I'm all right. Need another drink o' that whisky?"

"Not me, cowboy. Help yourself."

Brad grinned. "Me neither. Makes a man feel warm and kinda dizzy. That's the first time I ever tackled it."

"But you had a bottle along?"

"Shep's. I pack it for him."

"And just who is Shep? Sounds like a sheep-herder."

"Shep ain't a sheep-herder. He's about the smartest man in the world, barrin' none. Hm-m-m. Here comes company. And I'm on the wrong side o' Antelope Crick."

Three men rode up out of the rain. One of them was Tracy Banning. The other two rode horses wearing the BB brand.

The girl and Brad were on their feet now. The girl smiled at Tracy Banning.

"Hello, Uncle Tracy. Get down and enjoy the fire. How's this for duck weather?"

BOB RUTLEDGE

"Duck season," said Tracy Banning, stepping down off his horse and unbuttoning his slicker, "don't open for a week or two. But it's always open season for coyotes. What are you doing on this side of the boundary, young Rutledge?"

Tracy Banning's face was a dark, sinister mask. His hand was on his gun. The other men sat their horses.

Brad's jaws tightened. Never had he more resembled his father than when he faced Tracy Banning.

"I never meant to cross yore boundary, Banning," he said slowly. "Willingly, I wouldn't set foot on yore land for all the cattle in Montana. I don't pack a gun. If you was anywhere near my age and size,

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I'd ask you to lay off yore gun and fight like a man. Beggin' the lady's pardon, for I reckon she's a Banning, I'd sooner be found dead in an alley than on the BB range. Now pull yore gun and try yore luck. I ain't afraid of yuh. If I was a coyote, I'd run, wouldn't I? Some day, if you let me live now, I'll make you take back what yuh said. I'm forkin' my horse, mister. I'm bustin' that crick and goin' back onto Rutledge range, unless yo're the breed of polecat that shoots men in the back." Brad walked to where his big bay horse stood.

Blood wet Brad's injured face. He was water-soaked, half chilled, but his eyes were as hard as blue ice, and his grin was the grin of big Bob Rutledge. He stepped up on the big bay horse, and the next moment he and the horse were in the middle of the swollen creek.

IF he had looked back, he would have seen the girl standing by the fire, hot tears blinding her eyes. She was trying to call out to him, but her voice was choked.

Tracy Banning, a six-gun in his hand, stood there in the thin drizzle. The cowboys with him watched as Brad Rutledge and his big bay horse fought that terrific muddy current that carried them downstream like so much driftwood.

Man and horse went under and were lost to sight for a moment. Then they showed again, black spots on the muddy, foam-flecked water. A bend in the creek hid them.

"Save him!" sobbed the girl.

"Save a Rutledge?" said Tracy Banning. "I reckon not. Let the coyote drown."

Two hundred yards downstream, Brad and the big bay came ashore. Both water-logged, but both with the same game heart, they rode up a cut coulee and were lost in the rolling hills.

An hour later Brad rode into camp. He unsaddled the big bay horse and went to the mess tent. Only the cook was at camp. Brad drank some hot black coffee and saddled the horse Ab Adams had left tied to the rear wheel of the bed wagon. The rest of the outfit had eaten their dinner, changed horses, and gone out to work the cattle brought in on the morning circle. Blue sky was showing through the gray clouds. Brad had bandaged his face. As he rode toward the holdup grounds, he kept thinking of the hazel-eyed girl who had called Tracy Banning her uncle.

"Git lost?" asked Ab Adams when Brad showed up where they were working the cattle. His tone was like the sting of acid.

"If I was," said Brad, his voice a little sullen, "I wouldn't admit it."

"Yo're two hours late. Git in there an' start cuttin' out them cows and calves. Got a big brandin' to do. Some day yuh'll learn this cattle business, mebbe. Been asleep in some coulee, I reckon."

Brad's jaw tightened. "Don't talk to me like that, Ab. Not ever again. I got my fill of abuse. Keep that in mind." And he rode off into the holdup with another cowboy to cut out the cows and calves.

Ab Adams looked after Brad, a faint smile on his lipless mouth. It was a smile that might have meant almost anything.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE PROD.

RANGE gossip spreads like a prairie fire driven by a wind. In a week the cow country knew that Brad Rutledge had saved the life of Georgia Banning, daugh-

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ter of Taylor Banning. And when that word got to Bob Rutledge, the tale had grown, as such tales grow. The story that got to Bob Rutledge was that Brad and Georgia Banning were getting ready to run off and get married.

So when the Block R outfit brought in their herd for the first shipment, Bob Rutledge was on the prod. When the last carload of steers was loaded, Bob called Brad off to one side of the empty corrals. Brad had been working without sleep for twenty-four hours. He was sweaty and dusty, and his eyes were red-rimmed.

"What's all this about you and that Banning brat?" growled Bob Rutledge in a surly voice.

Brad's gloved hand instinctively passed across the scar on his jaw that was partly hidden by sweat-streaked dust.

"What do yuh mean, sir?" he asked. Dust had clogged his throat, and he talked in a husky whisper.

"I hear you and Taylor Banning's girl is goin' tuh run off an' git married. I'd ruther see yuh dead. Yore dead mother ud ruther see yuh dead. Hear that?"

"I hear what yuh said," said Brad. "I don't know where you got the notion, but yuh got it all wrong."

"You ain't runnin' off with that Banning girl?"

"Not that I know of. Not that she knows of." Brad's eyes did not waver as he looked at his father.

"Yuh wouldn't turn out to be a sneakin' liar, would yuh?"

"No." Brad's voice hardened a little. "No, I wouldn't turn out to be a sneakin' liar. Is that all yuh want of me?"

"Not all. Yo're gittin' to be almighty independent all of a sudden. Shep and Chalk has spoiled yuh, that's what. From now on, Ab will give you orders, and you'll take 'em or I'll bust yore neck. Ab's ramroddin' this outfit. You'll do what he tells yuh, or I'll kick yuh outta the country. Where there's smoke, there's fire, and everybody in the country is sayin' that my son is stuck on a Banning girl."

"Who was it told you?" asked Brad, breathing hard, his tongue moistening cracked lips.

"Ab told me how yuh got lost that mornin' on circle. Yeah, yuh rode over tuh meet that Banning brat of a girl. Fished her outta the crick. Then yuh let Tracy Banning run yuh off their range. A fine son you are fer a man like Bob Rutledge. From now on you pack a gun. If a Banning makes a pass at you, kill 'im. And if ever I ketch yuh minglin' with that Banning tribe, I'll horsewhup yuh. Now go ask Ab Adams what he wants yuh to do. And yuh do what he tells yuh. That whisky-guzzlin' Shep an' that Chalk has about spoiled yuh. Git outta my sight!"

Bob Rutledge whirled his horse and rode off toward town. Brad, white-lipped and shaking inside, watched his father ride away. Then he rode over to where Ab Adams was tallying up the cattle shipped.

"Pull out for camp," said Ab in his flat-toned voice. "Go stay there and look out for things. The mess wagon will be back to camp about dark. Throw the remuda in the big pasture, and tell the horse wrangler he kin come to town. Let the cook come in. You'll stay at camp and take care o' things. Drag it."

ON his way to camp, Brad kept thinking over his father's bitter accusations. After all, he couldn't blame his father. For years the Bannings and the Rut-

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ledges had hated. That hatred had cost the lives of brave men on both sides. Even Brad's mother, hit by a wild bullet, had died down there in Texas. And Chalk had told Brad that when Brad's mother died, there in the cabin on the Rutledge ranch in Texas, something inside of Bob Rutledge must have died with her.

It was Bob Rutledge's promise to his dying wife, not fear of the Bannings, that had driven Bob Rutledge out of Texas. He was the breed of man who gives all his love to but one woman. And when she asked him to take the little boy Brad and quit Texas and the feuding, he had given her his word and had kept it, though moving out as he did had branded him as a coward.

Perhaps that was why Bob Rutledge never gave Brad the love a father should give his son. Bob Rutledge, perhaps, deep in his heart, blamed the boy for the brand of coward that the Bannings had stamped on his tough hide when he quit Texas with Ab Adams and Chalk. Ab and Chalk would have stayed with Bob Rutledge until they had wiped out the last man of the Banning tribe. But Bob had given that promise and had kept it.

"If they foller me," he told them, "they'll git plenty o' fight."

Then they had got into a jack pot in New Mexico—some sort of cattle-rustling scrape involving wet cattle out of Mexico. Will Sheppard, a drunken attorney, had got them clear. And from then on Shep had been one of them.

Brad wondered what Shep would say about the girl. Would he side in with Bob Rutledge? Or would he tell Brad to pull stakes and lead his own life, and, if possible, get Georgia Banning to run off with him.

Brad rode on to camp and caught a fresh horse, which he staked out. He told the half-breed horse wrangler to shove the remuda in the pasture and go to town.

When the horse jingler had gone, Brad was alone in camp. It seemed lonesome with no cowboys around, the empty bed tent and mess tent, the mess wagon gone. There was only Brad and his horse on the sunny bank of Alkali Creek.

His shadow told him it was a little past noon. He took a swim in the shallow creek and shaved. He put on clean clothes, discarding his dirty ones. Then he sat there on the creek bank and played mumble-the-peg, left hand against the right.

The sun was warm. Big, fleecy clouds changed shape in the blue sky, and Brad, tiring of his lone game, lay on the flat of his back and conjured odd images out of the clouds. Then sleep came. It was the heavy sleep of a tired cowboy. He came awake with a start, sitting bolt upright. He found himself blinking at Georgia Banning.

"I took the wrong trail, and here I am," she said, getting down from her horse.

Brad got to his feet. He felt foolish, ill at ease, but only for a moment. He took the hand she held out to him, then dropped it.

"I'm afraid we've stirred up a lot of trouble," she said. "I caused it. You saved my life, Brad Rutledge, and I'll never forget it. I'll always be grateful."

"I'd be plumb tickled to do it over, ma'am."

"And I'd be plumb tickled to have you do it, Brad Rutledge. My name is Georgia. Can't we be friends in spite of all this talk of range war and gun fighting?"

"That's my idea, Georgia. Like Shep says, gun totin' is done by

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fools. I wish you could know Shep. I reckon I know what the Bannings call Will Sheppard, but way deep inside him he's the greatest man I ever met. He's kind inside. He understands things that no other man I ever met could understand. He don't like guns and gun fightin'. Some day he is goin' to tell me why. I bet it will be a story that'll bear listenin' to."

"I'd like to hear it," said the girl as they sat on the creek bank. "From what you say, I know I'd like your Shep."

"I bet yuh would," said Brad. "Ever play mumblety-peg?"

"Born and brought up on a cow ranch, and you ask me that?" She laughed. "Bet a peso I beat you, Brad. With your own knife."

Brad lost the first game and had to pull the small wooden peg from the ground with his teeth. Then Georgia lost. She was rooting at the peg, her small nose in the dirt, when a man on horseback topped the hill above camp.

"Here's your peg, Brad," she said, holding it between her white teeth. Her face was flushed, her hazel eyes dancing. To Brad Rutledge she was the most beautiful girl in all the world. Then she saw the approaching rider and wrinkled her dirt-smeared nose in a grimace. She handed the little wooden peg to Brad, who grinned and put it in his shirt pocket.

"That feller's ridin' like he owned the horse," said Brad. "One of our cowboys. Somethin's wrong to fetch a cowboy to camp before he blows his wages."

The cowboy pulled up his sweat-marked horse. He was a little excited. And his eyes were bloodshot, hard. Like Brad, he had worked long hours in the stockyards, loading cattle, and he hadn't washed up.

"Better git to town, Brad," he said briefly. "There's been a shootin', and Bob Rutledge is in bad shape. I reckon he'll die. And Taylor Banning is bad hurt. The two of 'em shot it out on the street!"

CHAPTER IV.

RIDING A GANTLET.

THE little cow town of Alkali had no hospital, though it supported seven saloons. The wounded men were taken to the hotel. Doctors were due to arrive from Great Falls and Helena on the next train. Meanwhile, in their hotel rooms, Bob Rutledge and Taylor Banning lay on blood-soaked mattresses and sheets in opposite rooms just across the hall.

"Ab," growled Bob Rutledge, "gimme my gun. I'll crawl tuh finish Taylor Banning. Gimme my gun, I tell yuh!"

But Chalk's giant black hands held Bob Rutledge in bed.

"Ah reckon yuh done got 'im, boss. Yep. Yes, suh, yuh dropped 'im lak as if he was a beef."

"Where's Ab?"

"Jus' outside de do', boss. Standin' guard. Ain' no Banning gents gittin' past Ab an' ol' Chalk."

"Where's Shep? Why ain't he here?"

"Mistah Shep, he say to tell you-all he's han'lin' law business fo' yuh. Impo'tant law business. Boss, that was a sho' enough lead swappin'. Dawgs! Jes' out an' at 'em. No cuss words, no hollerin', no fuss. Jus' out wid dem hawg laigs an' she comes de Fou'th o' Ju-ly. Jes lak shootin' dice. An' outta line stands me an' Ab, coverin' Tracy Banning so he ain't got a rabbit's chance tuh cut in. The most politest gun fight Ah evah had the pleasuah tuh look on at. Mistah Shep say fo' you to swal-

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ler down dis liquidation he left. He says if 'em lead slugs ain't ruined yuh, yuh'll plumb enjoy dis heah twenty-year-old rye."

Chalk poured the stuff down Bob Rutledge's throat. He had been shot three times. Once through the chest, once through the shoulder, and the third shot had gone through his thigh without hitting the bone. The town doctor was dividing his time between the two patients.

Across the hall, Taylor Banning lay on his back, his eyes shut. The doctor had given him something to put him to sleep, then had dug out two bullets from his side. Tracy Banning sat on a chair in the corner, a sawed-off shotgun across his lap, a six-gun and carbine on the table beside him. Outside the door, two heavily armed cowboys stood guard. They glared at the poker-faced Ab Adams, who had a six-gun in each hand as he leaned against the door of Bob Rutledge's room.

The little town of Alkali was boiling with excitement. Men, all packing guns, stood in groups on the plank sidewalks or leaned against the bars in saloons. The town was filled with cow-punchers who worked for Bob Rutledge. And now, at sundown, cowboys from the Banning outfit were riding in from their round-up camp, ten miles out of town.

The Mercantile had closed and barred its doors. One or two saloons, also, had shut their doors. There was a tenseness in the air. Men talked in low tones. They stayed in groups. Cold, hard eyes watched the Banning cowboys as they rode down the dusty street, hats slanted, six-guns handy. Spurs dragged along the broad plank sidewalks. Block R cowboys glared sullenly at the punchers from the BB wagon. The saloon men were uneasy. The tinhorns were wary-eyed, inwardly cursing the luck that was spoiling their games, because the cowboys from both outfits were thinking of other things besides cards and whisky and the dance halls.

"Every man keep cold sober," Ab Adams sent out word to his outfit. "And stay outta the games. I want yuh on yore feet if I need yuh. Keep yore horses saddled and tied to the hitch racks handy, because it looks like a big night."

The Banning men had much the same orders. Gradually the town was separated into two factions. On the north side of the street the Block R cowboys held forth. The cowboys from the BB outfit walked up and down the south side, their spurs let out to the "town hole," and fight in their eyes. Each faction was waiting for orders from headquarters. It would take but some trivial thing now to open up a war, there on the street.

At the sheriff's office was a group of armed men. The grizzled old sheriff, a one-time Ranger, chewed on a cold cigar as he listened to what Will Sheppard was saying.

Sheppard's cheeks were drawn and white, save for the telltale red spots on his cheek bones. Once he coughed, and the handkerchief that came away from his mouth was stained red.

"Like sitting on a keg of giant powder, sheriff, with the fuse sputtering." Sheppard quirked his left eyebrow and smiled. "The village vet says that either or both of 'em may die before morning. An' if either of 'em die, then this street is going to look like a Chicago slaughterhouse. No chance of disarming those men on the street?"

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"It would be a big job for a small army, but I'm goin' to try it. It's the only bet we have. I'll divide my men, and we'll go down both sides of the street. I'll take the Banning side. I'm deputizing you to take care of the Rutledge crowd. They know you, and they might give in. Ab Adams is the right man for the job you'll have."

"Ab Adams won't leave Bob, Sheriff. Besides, he wouldn't take the job you've so kindly wished on me. It was Ab's idea that the Block R cowboys buy up all the ammunition at the Mercantile. Ab is not what you might term a pacifist. Well, let's get started. I'll do my best. In case—just in case that my own particular part of the peace program fails, if I should stop a portion of lead, don't send lilies. Red roses, sheriff. Dandelions. Yea, even the lowly and despised loco weed. But not a lily. Try to decorate me with a lily and I'll haunt you to your grave. Let's go."

"Here's a shotgun, Sheppard. And a six-gun."

"I might hurt myself with 'em, thanks. I'll manage without the heavy artillery. And now let's—— Hold everything!"

Shep pointed to a couple riding into town. Side by side, along the dusty street, coming at a long lope, were Brad Rutledge and Georgia Banning.

Straight down the street, between the groups of staring, armed cowboys, Brad Rutledge, son of Bob Rutledge, and Georgia Banning, daughter of Taylor Banning, rode that gantlet.

Cow-punchers on both sides of the street began to shift uneasily. Here and there a grin showed. And every man of them watched Brad and Georgia swing off their horses and go together into the hotel.

"And now," said Will Sheppard, "is where we get in our good work, sheriff. Follow my lead."

He walked up the middle of the street, tall, nonchalant, dressed in a fastidious, almost foppish garb of gray and white and crimson—gray suit, white shirt, a crimson tie. He wore a red carnation in his buttonhole, powdered a bit now by the dust left hanging in the air, left by the hoofs of the horses ridden by Brad and Georgia. And behind him came the sheriff and a dozen deputies.

Shep stopped in the middle of the street. He made a gesture for silence, and a hush fell over the crowd that gathered from both sides of the street.

"Gentlemen," said Shep, "Bob Rutledge and Taylor Banning fought a duel a few hours ago. They fought because of that charming young lady and that young cowboy who just rode into town. The young lady and the young cowboy rode stirrup to stirrup. They seemed to be anything but unfriendly. Men, it looks like a horse on us. We've money in our pockets, and on both sides of the street we behold palaces of entertainment. Check your guns with the sheriff, boys, and the drinks are on me. Who's with me?"

"What's the matter with Shep?" roared a Block R cowboy.

"He's all right!" bawled a big cowpuncher from the BB.

"Who's all right?" yelled another voice. And a thunderous chorus took up the reply.

"Shep!"

BOB RUTLEDGE stared hard at his son, standing by his bedside. "Pull up a chair and set down," he said. "You, Chalk, go hunt up Shep and tell him to git here or he'll be too late.

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If he won't come, drag him here. What's all that shoutin' down the street?"

Ab Adams came in just in time to hear the question. His lean face was twisted in a sardonic grin.

"Shep made 'em a speech, right after Brad and the girl rode down the street together. Now our cowboys and them BB men is all the same brothers. They done buried the hatchet."

"With me dyin' here?" snarled Bob Rutledge. "Brad, what about you ridin' down the street with that Banning girl? What's the meanin' of it, anyhow?"

"We come to town together when we got the news about the fight, that's all."

Bob Rutledge sat up in bed, opening his bandaged wound in the effort. His square face was drawn into hard, bitter lines. His bloodshot eyes were narrowed, blue-gray slits, like knife blades lying in blood. From under his pillow he took his six-gun. There were four notches on the cedar butt of the gun.

"Each notch on this gun tallies a dead Banning," he said in a hard, gritty voice that had lost its Texas drawl. "Hear that? The old sawbones tells me I'm likely tuh die. He tells me that Taylor Banning ain't got much chance to live. If he dies, there'll still be Tracy Banning. If I die, there'll be you. If I die, this gun belongs to you. Take it and kill Tracy Banning where yuh find 'im. Swear it. Stand on yore feet an' swear it. Swear it, I tell yuh!"

"I never packed a gun," replied Brad, trying to keep his voice steady. "I ain't killin' no man."

Chalk had gone to fetch Shep. Ab Adams, Brad, and his father were alone in the room.

"Yuh don't want yore father's gun, is that it? The Bannings killed yore own mother. I'm dyin', mebby, from Banning lead. And you ain't man enough tuh play the chips I'm leavin' behind when I shove back my chair. Yo're th'owin' in with the Bannings. Quittin' yore own father and mother fer a Banning woman. What kind of a whelp are yuh, anyhow? I got a mind to kill yuh where yuh stand, yuh young coyote. Ab, th'ow him out. If ever he sets foot on my land, shoot him like yuh'd shoot a Banning. Th'ow him out, Ab!"

Brad faced Ab Adams. "Just a second, Ab. I got a word or two to say to my father. Lay a hand on me and I'll take you and yore gun and pitch yuh out that window. Stand away from me!"

Brad's voice was harsh, rasping, thick with emotion. He looked at his father, at the big, cedar-handled six-gun with its grim, notched tally of dead men.

"I'll stick to yuh, sir. Always. But I ain't killin' anybody. I ain't a killer. I won't go back to the ranch. Not till yuh need me and send for me. Yo're bad hurt. I'll be where Chalk and Shep kin find me. But don't send Ab Adams after me, or I'll break his back."

Brad turned away from the bed where his father sat propped against the crimson-stained pillows. He faced Ab Adams, who stood there, his hand on his gun.

"Better stand to one side," said Brad, his fists knotted, "or I'll give yuh what I've always wanted to give yuh. Stand aside, or I'll shove that gun down yore throat."

"No man kin talk like that to me——"

Brad's left fist shot out, catching Ab Adams on the jaw. As the gunman reeled backward, Brad jerked the six-gun from the man's hand

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and threw it through the window. Then a terrific swing floored Ab Adams. Brad stood there, breathing hard, looking from the unconscious Ab to Bob Rutledge.

"There lays yore hired killer," said Brad, and let himself out of the room.

He walked downstairs into the lobby. He met Shep and Chalk as they came in.

"If yuh need me," said Brad, "I'll be stayin' at yore cabin, Shep." And he walked out onto the street.

CHAPTER V.

BRAD'S RANCH.

IT takes a lot of lead to kill men like Bob Rutledge and Taylor Banning. A month later both were back at their ranches. Winter was closing in on the Montana cow country, and there was a flurry of snow on the ground. The Bannings had built a seven-wire drift fence between their range and the Block R range. Old-timers and Indians prophesied a long, hard winter.

Brad Rutledge had got a job with the Cross K outfit, east of the Banning and Rutledge ranges. And on his twenty-first birthday he took up a piece of land down on the Missouri River, at the foot of the bad lands. It had been taken up before by some one who had built a log cabin and a barn and cattle shed. There were several stacks of hay.

The owner had sold his relinquishment to Brad for a fair price. Shep had put through the deal and fixed it at the bank for Brad to pay off the place on time. And it was Shep who got Brad a bunch of cattle on shares. Only Shep knew that Chalk really owned the cattle. Chalk's life's savings had gone into that bunch of cattle.

"Bet a spotted hoss, Mistah Shep," said Chalk, "dat Brad makes us money. Dawg, but he's plumb tickled wid 'at layout. Workin' from daylight till da'k, fixin' up things. Buidin' fence, patchin' roofs, chinkin' an' daubin' 'at cabin an' bahn an' shed."

"Don't ever let on to Robert that we helped Brad. He'd skin us alive. Bob Rutledge likes to brag how he's glad to be rid of Brad. But there

BRAD RUTLEDGE

are times, Chalk, when I have a hunch he misses the boy. Whenever you get the chance, slip down and see how he's making it. Things in town are keeping me as busy as the proverbial paper hanger. The Bannings are going after Bob Rutledge on this land-grabbing business. They're putting men in on the Block R range, taking up desert claims, and buying scrip from the government. Seen any of those squatters?"

"Yes, suh."

"Texicans?"

"Yuh knows it. Right from de Banning range in Texas. Gun-totin' folks, all of 'em. Looks like trou-

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ble done bound tuh come. Mistah Bob goin' limpin' aroun' on them crutches, fit tuh be tied. Ab Adams lookin' like he been eatin' raw cactus an' rattlesnakes. Dawg, but they's mean 'ese heah days. Mistah Bob sweahs he's gonna bust at Banning drift fence wide open fust big snow when them cattle commences driftin'. Good winta range south o' 'at drift fence, an' them Block R steers gonna need 'at range. Free range, Mistah Bob calls it."

Will Sheppard nodded. If that drift fence was cut, the Block R cattle would drift into the bad lands below, onto land that the Bannings were claiming. It had always been used as winter range by Bob Rutledge. Now only BB cattle were down there, excepting for a few wild cattle missed on the round-up. Brad's place was thirty miles below the drift fence.

Shep, in getting the ranch for Brad, had stolen a march on the Bannings, who wanted it badly, as it fringed on their range and could be developed into a valuable line camp. There were acres of wild hay, and a hundred acres in alfalfa under irrigation in the summer; good feed back in the hills above and down along the bottom land. Now Brad Rutledge owned it. Shep had outfoxed the Bannings. And he had outfoxed Bob Rutledge, who would have paid ten prices for the place.

BRAD had seen nothing of Georgia Banning. He heard she had gone to Florida, or Virginia, or somewhere. He had not seen her since that day when they had ridden together into Alkali. He had written her twice, but had got no reply. Yet hard work on his ranch left him little time for thought. Alone there on the river, he got little news from the outside. Visitors were few. Brad welcomed this solitude. It gave him a chance to think, a chance to adjust himself to this new life away from his father.

He heard rumors about lawsuits over land and water rights. The news was that the government and State were going after Bob Rutledge, and that only for the cleverness of Will Sheppard, the big cowman would now be behind the bars. Shep had got one postponement after another. He was fighting desperately for time, using every trick in the bag to save the freedom of Bob Rutledge.

Brad was mending a fence when a buckboard carrying two men came through the gate. One of them, the man driving, was from Alkali. He ran the livery stable there. The other man in town clothes was a stranger.

"Brad Rutledge?" said the town man. "My name's Markson. I'm from Butte. An attorney by profession. I'm coming to the point abruptly, as we want to be back up out of the hills by dark. I represent a cattle outfit. This outfit wants to buy you out. What's your lowest price?"

"I'm not sellin'," said Brad. "Not at any price. I reckon I'm kinda foolish not to sell if I could git a good price, but I ain't sellin' out. Sorry yuh had yore trip for nothin', mister. Who wants the place. The Bannings? Or Bob Rutledge, my father?"

"I can't divulge the name of the client. I'll offer you twice what it cost you."

"Nope." Brad started back splicing his barb wire.

"Three times."

"Not for ten times what I paid for it," said Brad, grinning. "It's the first real thing, outside a horse and saddle and bed, I ever owned.

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I ain't sellin' out. Go back and tell that to whoever hired yuh."

"You're a young fool!" snapped the attorney, angered by Brad's indifference.

Brad straightened up, his fence pliers in his hand. He was still grinning, but his eyes stared hard at the blustering attorney.

"Step outta that buckboard and say that over, mister. Or else git off my place, and git off quick, or I'll drag yuh outta that rig and hang yuh on a fence post."

"Drive out of here," muttered the attorney, his bluster giving way to fear as Brad stepped toward the buckboard. "Let's get out of here and back to the ranch. The man's liable to kill us. He's dangerous. Get the team started."

Brad grinned as he watched them drive away. Then he went back to his fence repairing, whistling as he worked.

It was about a week later that he found a notice tacked to his gate post.

He read the words painted in red on a board.

Clear out or you'll be smoked out.

WINTER came softly, with big snowflakes that made the world a white blanket. There was no wind. A man riding horseback had to get off now and then and knock the packed balls of snow from his horse's hoofs. Brad was doing some "rawhiding"—fetching in poor cattle or cows with late calves. And every time he came back to the ranch with his cows, and perhaps a calf across his saddle, he would notice the sign at the gate. Somebody was paying him visits. But the visits were made when Brad was away from the place.

Brad would find a shirt missing, or some tobacco. And each visit was marked by an empty .30-40 shell left on the table. Two weeks had passed since the visit of the attorney named Markson.

Then, at dusk one evening, as Brad was finishing his barn chores, Chalk rode up. Chalk, in a heavy green mackinaw and black-and-white chaps, led a pack horse that carried his tarp-covered bed.

Brad was never so glad to see a man. Chalk acted like a boy playing hooky from school. He was packing an extra Winchester and a .45, which he carried to the cabin and laid on Brad's bunk. Brad looked rather sharply at the giant Negro.

"How come the extra artillery, Chalk?" he asked as he got the fire going.

"Mistah Shep's idee. He say how it's gonna be a sho' bad wintah fo' vahmints like skunks an' coyotes an' wolves. He say how yuh-all bettah git handy wif 'em weapons. He 'lowed I better learn yuh how tuh utilize 'em guns."

"Shep said that? Shep?"

"Yes, suh. Mistah Shep." Chalk washed up and started getting supper. Chalk was as good a camp cook as ever made sour-dough biscuits.

Behind Chalk's wide grin lay news, and Brad waited for it. But Chalk wasn't ready to talk. He sang as he got supper. Now and then he would dance a shuffle. And he kept on his belt and gun.

"Chalk, what's up? What fetches you here?" asked Brad impatiently.

"Gits mah ohdehs fum Mistah Shep. Comes heah. Me, I dunno whut's up. But you kin bet it's somethin'. Mistah Shep, he say play my cahds keerful. He talks big words about sittin' on a volcano mountain which is mos' likely blow up ary day. Whar at dat mountain, Mistah Brad?"

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"Can't say, Chalk. Shep never sent a letter?".

"Shucks, now, he sho' did. Done fergits whut's whut when it's grub time. Heah's a lettah."

Chalk fished out a sealed letter bearing Brad's name. Brad opened it and read it in the candlelight.

DEAR BRAD: Burn this after you read it. Things are getting somewhat serious. Both the Bannings and Robert are chanting their war songs. You might be dragged into it, and so I am sending Chalk down to stay with you. When the first bad storm comes down out of the north, look for trouble. Your father is like a grizzly with a sore paw. The Bannings are playing a mighty clever game and they're out to hamstring Bob Rutledge. They're using the law to do it. Bad sportsmanship on the part of a feudist, I'd say. But so far we're beating them in court.

Your father is getting harder to handle every day. He even turns, at times, on the estimable Ab Adams. Brad, Chalk will stand by you. Bank on Chalk in a tight. He's an old head at the game so do what he says. Trust nobody but Chalk. And if you have to use the guns I am sending, use them. It will undoubtedly surprise you to learn that Will Sheppard, attorney at law and lawlessness, now totes an equalizer in the shape of an old Colt he put away many years ago. And now, Brad, I bid you farewell for a time. Follow the lessons I have taught you. But keep those guns handy and never ride anywhere without Chalk. Your friend,

SHEP.

Brad finished reading the letter. Chalk was humming some Negro tune. There was the odor of coffee and sour-dough biscuits and frying venison brought by Chalk. From outside came the howl of a wolf.

"Chalk," asked Brad as he put Shep's letter in the fire, "how long do you figger on stayin' down here with me?"

"Fo' keeps, near as Ah kin figgah."

"Yuh quit the Block R, Chalk?"

"Ah jes' nacherally up an' run off. Knowed Ah'd commence ahguments if Ah tells Mistah Bob whut Ah aims tuh do. So Ah snuk off. Jes' nacherally lit a shuck, an' heah's ol' Chalk. Smell 'at venison meat, Mistah Brad? A fo'-point blacktail buck."

"Yuh mean yuh ain't goin' back, Chalk?"

"Not while yuh-all have need uh me, Mistah Brad. Mistah Shep 'low we's settin' on 'at volcano mountain. Chalk gonna set till she blow up. Ain' I tell yo' mammy, long time ago, nobody gonna hahm you while big Chalk kin he'p it? Ain' I remembah time when yo' own mammy nu'se 'is heah wuthless thing out from de shadow o' death when 'em Bannings shoot him up, down alongside Mexico? Yes, suh, she nu'se 'is ol' rascal right out from 'at brink o' death. Nu'sed me twice mo' when Ah's ailin' wid bad fevah.

"An' so, when she dyin' that a way, an' she ask me look aftah huh baby, I gits down on 'ese heah knees 'at ain't nevah been bent much, a-prayin', an' Ah sweahs Ah always look out fo' 'at baby. Shucks, 'em biscuits is smokin'. See whut comes o' gabbin'?" As the giant Negro knelt to open the oven of the little sheet-iron stove, his head was bent, a head sprinkled with gray now. And something like a sob shook the heavy shoulders.

Brad's throat choked him. It was hard, right now, to think of Chalk as a killer.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WOUNDED COWBOY.

BRAD told Chalk about the visit of the attorney named Markson, of the warning, and of the visits of a man who left an empty rifle shell. Chalk listened in

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grave silence, and the whites of his eyes showed vividly in the candlelight.

The next day, and for several days afterward, when Brad went out rawhiding, Chalk stayed at camp. But nobody showed up. Brad practiced shooting with carbine and six-gun and got so he could do more than fairly well. Chalk called him a natural shot and spent hours showing him how to draw a gun fast and how to shoot from the hip. Then he took both six-guns and demonstrated what is known as the double roll, spinning a gun in each hand. Chalk's twelve bullets riddled a fence post. A tin plate covered the area of the bullet holes. Then Chalk showed Brad some shooting with a Winchester that seemed like magic.

Brad got to like the feel of a gun in his hand. He got to be a good shot. But when Chalk wanted him to shoot a rabbit, the cowboy balked.

"I'll hunt for meat if I'm starvin', Chalk. Or if the sign comes right and I have to fight, I'll do my best. But I ain't killin' a rabbit that I don't need for meat. And I ain't killin' any man if I kin help it. Not even if I'm called a coward, Chalk. I'll never be a gun fighter."

Chalk scratched his head. Chalk couldn't understand. But he knew that Brad was not lacking in courage and he tried to figure it all out.

"Don't think too hard on it, Chalk," said Brad, as they cleaned their guns. "Thinkin' always made yuh dizzy."

Chalk liked to be "hoorawed." He had got hold of an old banjo somewhere and at night he played, and they sang songs that Chalk taught Brad. They were Negro songs, plaintive, colorful, sad, sometimes gay—plantation songs, levee songs, that had come from the old slave days.

They were there in the cabin one night, Chalk picking the battered banjo and singing, Brad reading a book of Shep's called "Tom Sawyer," when they heard the squeak of shod hoofs in the packed snow outside.

Chalk's big black paw swept out the candlelight. Still picking his banjo, he stepped alongside Brad.

"Git fixed. Foller mah play. Iffen it's trouble comin', it's trouble we sell 'em. Git behin' 'at bunk. Lemme do de shootin'. You do de talkin'. Keep in de dahk."

There was the sound of voices outside, then a pounding on the door. Brad reckoned there were at least two men.

"Who's there?" called Brad, his gun in his hand as he crouched in the darkness. Chalk's banjo was silent now. Brad could picture the black giant, crouched, guns ready.

"It's Taylor Banning. I found a man hurt back in the brakes. He needs attention. Can he get it here?"

"Fetch him in and shut the door," replied Brad. "Soon as I make sure it ain't a trick, I'll do what I kin do."

"It's no trick, young Rutledge," sounded Taylor Banning's voice as he opened the door. "The Bannings don't play tricks."

Now a match burst into flame. Taylor Banning lighted the candle on the table. Then he went outside and helped in a lurching, blood-smeared man. He slid the man into a chair, then shut the door and barred it. There was a thin smile on his handsome face as he faced Brad and Chalk. He slid his gun from its holster and laid it on the table, then shed his blood-spattered coonskin coat.

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"We'll need hot water and clean bandages," said Taylor Banning. "The man's been shot through the shoulder and through one leg. Know him?"

"Yes," said Brad, "I know him. He's a Block R man." He set about getting a kettle of water heated. Some flour-sack dish towels, freshly washed, would serve as bandages. And as they laid the man on Chalk's tarp, there on the floor, Taylor Banning rolled back the sleeves of his flannel shirt. His left arm was bleeding above the elbow. Chalk sat back in a corner, taking no part. His eyes kept watching Taylor Banning.

"Looks like you kin stand some bandagin', yoreself," Brad said as he and Taylor Banning ripped off the wounded man's shirt as carefully as was possible.

Taylor Banning's black eyes looked hard at Brad. "Just a scratch, young Rutledge. The bushwhacker was drunk, I think. At least there was a half-empty jug in the snow near him. I should have killed him, I reckon, but he begged like a yellow dog. I didn't know Bob Rutledge was hirin' bushwhackers."

"An' yuh-all kin bet he never hiahed one in his life," growled Chalk.

"This man laid for me and tried to kill me," said Taylor Banning, ignoring Chalk completely. "He's a Block R man. There are two bullets in him that I'll probe for and extract. The rest of the job will be up to you, young Rutledge. I'll need a sharp knife."

Chalk, from his corner of the cabin, flipped a long-bladed hunting knife. It struck the table point first, within a few inches of Taylor Banning's hands, where he was making bandages. The knife, stuck in the plank table, quivered. Its blade was spotless, its black ebony handle polished.

TAYLOR BANNING'S lean, long-fingered hands were like the hands of a skilled surgeon. Brad and Chalk had to hold down the wounded man while Taylor Banning worked. Brad watched, fascinated by the man's swift skill. And it was plain to be seen that Chalk was impressed. Two blunted, bloody slugs were extracted. And Taylor Banning did the work with an improvised tourniquet about his own arm. The wounded man, delirious with pain, cursed them all. Chalk fed him raw whisky and held him down while Brad came and went with fresh bandages and warm water and the sterilized black-handled knife that had killed, but now was being used to save a man's life.

When the wounded man had been cared for and had gone to sleep, Taylor Banning rolled a cigarette.

"I got the hang of it, now," said Brad. "Lemme patch up yore arm. It needs 'tendin' to."

"I'd rather die, young Rutledge, than to have a——"

Chalk's big fist caught Taylor Banning on the jaw. Banning went down in a heap. Chalk grinned.

"Bimeby he'll come alive, so git busy, Mistah Brad."

Brad bandaged Taylor Banning's arm. Chalk made some coffee and spiked it with whisky.

Taylor Banning sat up after a while. Brad grinned as the cattleman looked at his neatly bandaged arm.

"It's stormin' outside," said Brad. "Yuh couldn't git a mile in the blizzard that's hittin' us. Looks like we'll have tuh put up with one another for a few hours."

"Meaning, I reckon, that I'm a

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prisoner," said Taylor Banning, whose jaw ached up into his temple.

"Not that," replied Brad. "Yonder's yore gun on the table. The door ain't barred. But a bad storm is hittin' us, and no man or horse kin travel far without gittin' lost. I'm askin' you tuh stay till the storm is over. There won't be no rattlesnakes in the blankets I'll give yuh. There won't be no poison in yore grub. I'm askin' you tuh spend the night, that's all. Take it or leave it."

Outside the storm howled and moaned. The teeth of a blizzard were biting into the bad lands. Chalk had already stabled Taylor Banning's horse and the horse belonging to the Block R bushwhacker.

There was no need to step outside to see that no man or horse could travel far in that storm. Taylor Banning pulled the sleeve of his flannel shirt over his bandaged arm. He smiled faintly as he looked sharply at Brad.

"Young man," he said, measuring his words, "if you weren't a Rutledge, I'd like to have you for a friend. Thanks for the shelter. I'm accepting your hospitality. It might be a sign of cowardice on my part, or a sign of weakness, but I'm taking you up on your invitation. I hope that I'll be able to return the courtesy some day. As a matter of fact I am already in your debt. You saved the life of my daughter. Now you offer me shelter from a blizzard. I hope, young Rutledge, that there will never come a day when I'll meet you with a gun in my hand."

"That goes double," said Brad. "Help yoreself to the coffee. Looks like our bushwhacker is goin' tuh sleep a month."

The wounded cowboy was breathing heavily. He moaned in his sleep of delirium and muttered through set teeth. Chalk brought in more wood. Outside the blizzard whipped at the cabin. Taylor Banning and Brad sat in a strained silence.

The wounded man finally had to be tied down to keep him from threshing around and opening up his wounds. The slivers of wind that crept into the log cabin made the flames of the two tallow candles gutter.

"Turn in?" asked Brad.

Banning shook his head. "I'll sit up."

"There's my blankets," said Brad. "I'll split 'em with yuh."

"No," said Taylor Banning, as he filled a pipe from a leather pouch, "this man here may need attention. He's in bad shape. I studied for two years at medical school. You claim that the Block R never hired a bushwhacker. Yet this man tried to murder me. I want to hear what he has to say when he comes awake. I hope he proves that he wasn't hired by Bob Rutledge to kill me."

"If he says my father hired him to bushwhack any man," said Brad, "he lies."

"I hope you're right," said Taylor Banning.

"Where was it he was layin' for yuh?" asked Brad.

"At the drift fence."

A silence followed that remark. Brad Rutledge and Taylor Banning and Chalk knew that Bob Rutledge was waiting for the first blizzard to break through the drift fence. Bob Rutledge had planned to cut the fence and let through the cattle that would drift down into the bad lands. Bob Rutledge had sent warning to the Bannings that the drift fence would be cut between every panel, and that the Block R cattle would winter in the bad lands now claimed by the BB outfit.

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CHAPTER VII.

SADDLE STRINGS.

CHALK kept pacing back and forth in the cabin, his ebony face marked with worry. Brad dozed in his bunk. Now and then the wounded Block R man would mutter in his delirium, and Chalk—a huge figure in red flannel undershirt and blanket-lined canvas overalls and bare feet, his gun shoved in the waistband of his overalls—would stand over him. Taylor Banning, stern-eyed, suffering a little from his hurt, kept smoking his pipe. Outside, the storm beat at the cabin like some invisible thing alive, moaning. The candlelight threw distorted shadows on the log walls. Chalk's bare feet *pad-padded* on the dirt floor—dirt packed as hard as concrete.

"Like a black panther," mused Taylor Banning, and he mused aloud unknowingly.

Brad jerked out of a half sleep. "How's that?"

"I didn't mean to say it," confessed Taylor Banning, "but Chalk pacing up and down, reminds me of a black panther."

Chalk rolled the whites of his eyes without stopping his monotonous walking. There was something unreal, something uncannily sinister that gripped the men in the cabin. Taylor Banning consulted his heavy silver watch, which he carried in a chamois pouch.

"Three o'clock." He put his watch back in its chamois pouch and stowed it in his watch pocket.

The wounded man opened his eyes. Taylor Banning bent over him.

"Feel better?" he asked.

The man stared at him, then sat up slowly. Brad quit his bunk. He was fully dressed, save for his boots. Chalk stood on his widespread legs, looking down at the man. Brad wondered if there was a threat in Chalk's eyes as he stood beyond Taylor Banning and the Block R cowboy. The Negro stood there for the fraction of a moment, then moved aside, giving way to Brad. The cowboy had looked at Taylor Banning, then at Chalk. Now he looked at Brad.

"Who hired you to bushwhack me?" asked Taylor Banning.

The man grinned twistedly. "Fetch me a drink, Chalk. Two drinks. One outta the jug an' one outta the bucket. Howdy, Brad. Who's this feller askin' questions about bushwhackin'?"

"Who hired you to take that pot shot at me?" asked Taylor Banning.

The wounded man chuckled hoarsely. "Was it you that I taken a shot at? I must 'a' been drunk. I was shootin' at a grizzly. Taken one shot when some cuss opened up on me and the next I knowed I was in the cabin here. Then everything goes dark again, and I wake up now. I never bushwhacked nobody. Chalk, did I ever bushwhack a man? Tell 'im, Chalk. Tell 'im, Brad. I'm just a wild cowboy that gits a cork out of a jug sometimes an' gargles down too much redeye. I was bear huntin'. Now ain't it jest like a fool cowboy tuh mistake a man for a bear. Looks like I come out on the losin' end, bear or no bear. Chalk, I'm dry."

Chalk brought a tin cup filled with whisky and a dipper filled with water. Brad took them from Chalk's hands.

"When this snake talks, Chalk," said Brad, "he'll git his water and his booze. Listen, feller, who told you tuh kill Taylor Banning?"

The man's flinty, bloodshot eyes looked at Brad. Then, with a snarl,

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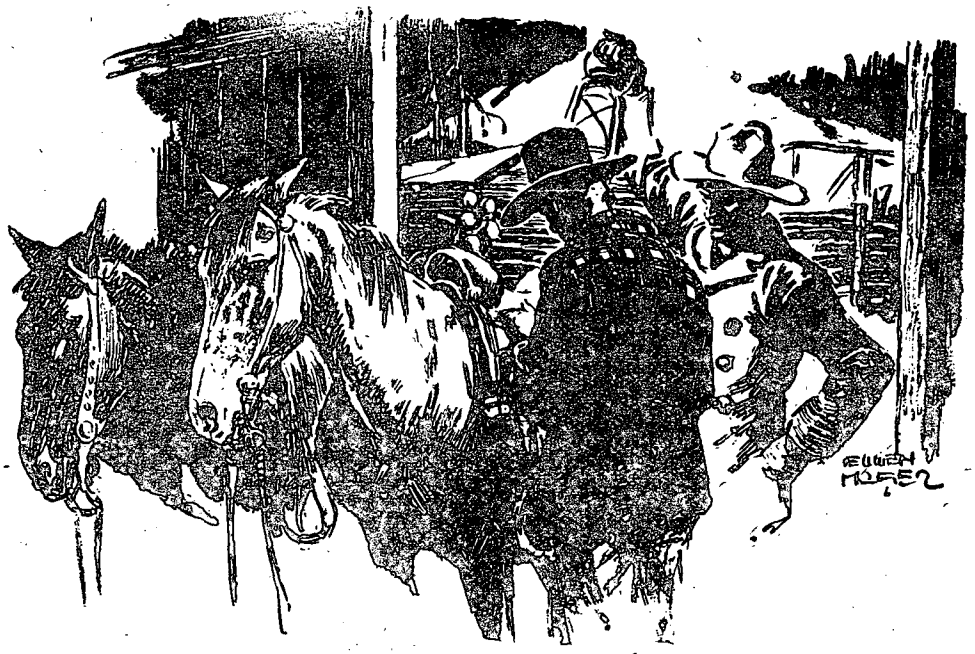

he knocked the cup and dipper from Brad's hands. He lay back on the bloodstained tarp, an evil grin on his unshaven face.

"I'd heard about yuh th'owin' in with the Banning spread," he said, sneering. "If I wasn't bad hurt, I'd ask you a few questions. I taken Taylor Banning for a grizzly. He shot me up. That's all you or ary man will git outta me. Even if I die here. Git that, Brad Rutledge? Git that, Banning?"

Brad had been squatting on his heels beside the wounded man. Now he got up and pulled on his boots. He got into his overcoat and lighted a lantern.

"Watch him, Chalk. Banning, you kin come along or you kin stay, just as yuh like."

"Whar yuh goin', Mistah Brad?" asked Chalk, his black forehead puckered with worry.

"To the barn and back, Chalk. Ride herd on this man. He's not as badly hurt as he's let on. He played possum on us. Heard what we talked about. He's tough and he's dangerous. Watch him, Chalk. I'm playin' a hunch."

"I'll go along," said Taylor Banning, pulling on his coonskin coat. "How about my gun?"

"Take it," said Brad, "or leave it. It don't matter. We're only goin' to the barn an' back."

Taylor Banning slipped his gun back into its holster. The wounded man laughed through set teeth—an ugly, menacing laugh.

"Better go heeled, both of yuh," he told them.

AT the barn, Brad asked Taylor Banning to hold the lantern. Then he carefully examined the wounded man's saddle. He looked at Banning and grinned.

"New saddle strings, see? And they're yellow whang leather. A new whang leather rope strap. My hunch is right, I'm thinkin'. We kin go back to the cabin now."

"What are you getting at, young Rutledge?"

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"I'm gittin' at somethin' that's been on my mind the past week or so. Before we go back to the cabin, I'm askin' you a straight question. I want the right answer."

"Shoot it, young Rutledge."

"Do you hire a lawyer named Markson?"

"You mean Ike Markson, from Butte?"

"He's from Butte. Kinda fat. Wears glasses. Has one eye that looks like it was covered with a milky scum. Name is Markson."

"That's Ike Markson."

"Did you send him here to buy me out?"

"Young Rutledge, if I wanted to buy you out, I wouldn't hire a crooked shyster like Ike Markson to put across the deal. I don't do business that way. I know Ike Markson. He's as slimy as a snake. Young man, the Bannings don't use slimy snakes. Bob Rutledge may have his Will Sheppard, but Taylor Banning don't need the aid of crooked shysters."

"I was askin' about Markson," said Brad. "Leave Shep outta this. Shep is my friend. I know he ain't any church-goin' man, but he's been a mighty good friend to me. I'd fight any man that called him a name. Yuh savvy?"

"I'll apologize, young Rutledge," said Taylor Banning gravely, albeit there was an almost humorous twinkle in his black eyes. "I spoke hastily. We were on the subject of Ike Markson. He tried to buy this place from you?"

"And I run him off. After that I was warned to quit the country. The man that brought the warnings stole a wide strip of yellow whang leather that I had in under my tarp. It matches up with the new saddle strings and rope strap on this saddle. That's all."

"Not quite all, young Rutledge. That man made an accusation. He accused you of throwing in with the Bannings. Range rumor has it that you quit your father because of my daughter. Is that true?"

Brad faced Taylor Banning in the lantern light. He nodded briefly and lowered the smoking wick of the lantern.

"Somethin' like that, yes, sir."

"Just what is your interest in my daughter?"

"I think a heap of her, that's all."

Taylor Banning's thin smile was like the edge of a sharp knife. His voice was cold, merciless, when he spoke.

"My advice to you is to go back to your father. You're his son. The son of his blood. Rutledge blood. Bob Rutledge will need you before long. You'd better stand by him. And as for my daughter Georgia marrying a Rutledge, I'd rather see her in her coffin. Young Rutledge, if ever I catch you with her, I'll shoot you down like I'd shoot a mad dog. Is that understood?"

"Yuh said it plenty plain," said Brad. "But I'm tellin' you what I'd tell my father, that if Georgia Banning would have me, I wouldn't be scared off by all the guns that both yore feudin' outfits pack."

"What if I dared you to shoot it out here and now?" asked Taylor Banning, his eyes narrowing.

"I left my gun in the cabin," said Brad. "And if I did have it and you crowded me into a gun play, yuh'd never live to git out of this barn. It would be you, not me, that got killed."

"Meaning, I reckon, that you're a fast gun thrower?"

"Not me." Brad grinned, and raised the lantern so that its light shone on a huge shape in the doorway—the figure of Chalk. The lan-

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tern light reflected on the blue steel of Chalk's drawn six-gun.

"I reckon," said Brad, "we might as well git back to the cabin. That bushwhackin' cowboy might git into mischief."

"Not him," said Chalk, chuckling. "Ah done tied him down. He's bad medicine."

TAYLOR BANNING looked from Chalk to Brad. The cattleman's black eyes were hard and cruel. He hated the giant.

"I hope to have the satisfaction and pleasure some day," he told Chalk in a voice that grated like sandpaper, "of killing you."

Brad leading the way with the lantern, they quit the shelter of the barn. The wind drove snow into their faces. It swirled around their legs. A sudden gust of wind blew out the lantern light. They stood there in that black blizzard.

Chalk's grisly chuckle sounded above the whine of the storm.

"Ah'd be proud," he was saying, "to give yuh-all that chance right now, Mistah Taylah Banning."

"Quit it, Chalk," snapped Brad. "Yonder's the cabin light. Head for it. Forget this gun fightin' for to-night, anyhow. I offered Taylor Banning shelter. The least we kin do is not kill him off. It wouldn't seem exactly hospitable. Let's go on to the cabin."

They floundered through the darkness, headed for the lighted window of the cabin. Chalk was the first to get there. He opened the door, and they went in.

Before he took off his cap or overcoat, Brad released the wounded man. But before he untied the ropes, he went through the man's pockets. He found a jackknife, tobacco, matches, odds and ends. Then, with a faint grin, he fished three empty .30-40 shells from the man's pocket. The wounded man eyed him in silence.

Chalk made fresh coffee. Nobody wanted to sleep. Taylor Banning, Chalk, and Brad talked a little. The wounded bushwhacker lay there, sipping coffee spiked with whisky, his bloodshot, menacing eyes watching them. Every man was wondering about what was going to happen at the drift fence as soon as daylight broke the black sky.

An hour before daylight Taylor Banning showed signs of being restless. With the first crack of dawn he pulled on his chaps and overshoes and big coonskin coat.

Chalk looked inquiringly at Brad. Brad shook his head as the Negro started as if to bar Banning's way.

"Let 'im go, Chalk."

"Thanks, young Rutledge. You make an interesting host. I'm in your debt. I'll pay the debt some day." Taylor Banning fastened the frogs of his fur coat.

"What about me, Banning?" asked the wounded man, sitting up, his bewhiskered face twisted in an ugly grimace. "Goin' tuh leave me here to be murdered by that devil Chalk?"

"Why should I bother about you? I'm going to be busy to-day and I can't stay here to nurse you. I'll send a sled down as soon as the storm breaks. That's doing enough for a Block R bushwhacker."

"Leavin' me, are yuh? Quittin' me, are yuh, Banning?" The man's voice was a snarling growl. His bloodshot eyes were ugly to look at —killer's eyes, wherein lay the lights of treachery and cruelty.

"I made a mistake, I reckon," said Taylor Banning coldly, "when I didn't kill you."

"Yuh shore did," snarled the man, laughing crazily, "yuh shore did.

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Just like I made mine when I was taken for somebody else. If Chalk don't kill me, an' I git back on my feet, I'll take care o' you. You better kill me now, Banning, because if I live, I'll git yuh."

"I'll risk that, bushwhacker." Taylor Banning's hand was on the wooden door latch.

"You askin' me who hired me tuh lay along the trail," said the man, "with a Winchester an' a jug o' whisky. Just as if yuh didn't know who's payin' me!"

"What do you mean by that, you snake?" growled Banning, his face paling a little.

The wounded man sagged back on the tarp, reaching shakily for his spiked coffee.

"We'll meet up some day, Banning. And you better be ready for me." He lay back, breathing heavily.

Taylor Banning stood there a moment, staring at the man. Then he lifted the latch and left the cabin.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE DRIFT FENCE.

MAN-MADE plans are fragile things. Fate had intervened to prevent a bloody massacre there at the drift fence.

True, the BB cowboys, heavily armed and under the leadership of Tracy Banning, were on hand, huddled in makeshift shelters, ready to shoot any man who cut the fence. They had been there since the first hint of dawn—grim-lipped, cold-eyed men from the Texas plains, where many a killer has been born and reared.

North of the drift fence, in a line camp, nearly a score of Block R men waited in vain for the coming of Bob Rutledge and Ab Adams. And from the cabin they could see the dim shapes of drifting cattle, heads lowered, traveling before the wind-driven blizzard.

Noon, afternoon, then the early winter twilight found them still there in the cramped quarters of the small log cabin. Without the leadership of Bob Rutledge or Ab Adams they were powerless to move. And when the blackness of night trapped them, they began to wonder if something had happened to Bob Rutledge and the tight-lipped Ab Adams.

While the Block R men sat around on the floor of their warm cabin, the BB gunmen shivered and cursed behind their inadequate shelters. Tracy Banning, in a big buffalo coat, rode from one shelter to the next.

"They might be waiting for dark," he told his men. "Don't quit your posts."

"How about grub?" asked one man.

"You'll eat when your job's done."

"Me," said one cowboy, "I could use a quart o' redeye."

"There'll be a keg on tap at camp when the work is done."

Taylor Banning showed up late in the afternoon. His brother scowled at him.

"Where the devil have you been, anyway?"

Taylor Banning smiled thinly. "You'd never guess."

"I sent a man out after yuh."

"That was thoughtful of you," said Taylor Banning acidly, "but so far in life, I've been able to take care of myself. Who's been in charge of this drift-fence business while I was laid up at the ranch?"

"Joe Slocum. Thought I told you that I'd let Joe handle the fence business while we gathered the cattle."

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"I'm having a talk with Joe Slocum. I want to ask him some questions and I want the right answers. Even if I have to take him down to Brad Rutledge's ranch to make him prove what I suspect to be the truth. There's a man down there that's badly wounded. He might die. There's a bullet nick in my arm. I spent the night at young Rutledge's ranch."

"Who shot yuh, Taylor?"

"A man that works for the Block R. His name don't matter because he'd give the wrong name. He was paid to bushwhack somebody. The light was bad, and he was two-thirds drunk. He opened up on me, and I shot him twice. Then I took him to young Rutledge's ranch. It was only about a three-mile trip. Now that man wasn't expecting you or me to be riding down close to the ranch that young Rutledge bought. He mistook me for somebody else. I'm wondering who he thought he was shooting at. He wouldn't talk, but he made some queer remarks, just before I left this morning. I'd like to have a talk with our cousin Joe Slocum."

"Yuh'll find him about three miles down the fence. If it's any of my business, Taylor, how come you were down in that country instead of at the home ranch?"

"Just one of my notions, Taylor. Just an idea. It didn't work out as I expected. I was going down to make Brad Rutledge an offer for his place. Or get him to feed some of our cattle on a percentage basis, maybe."

"You'd dicker with a Rutledge?" snapped Tracy Banning.

Taylor Banning smiled a little. "I didn't make him an offer. I told you it didn't work out as I expected. No word from the Block R outfit?"

"I know that their men are at a line camp north of the drift fence. They've been there since last night. But they haven't made a move. I'm betting they'll wait till dark."

"Dark? With a storm like this! If they don't show up by dusk, call the men off the fence. They can't stand this blizzard forever. I look for it to storm all night. Taylor, I'll bet you two to one, any part of a thousand dollars, that the Block R outfit don't make a try at fence-cutting this time."

"Two to one? Got some inside information?"

"Call it that if you like. Take it for what it's worth. I'm banking on it. The Block R men won't make a move without Bob Rutledge or Ab Adams, will they?"

"Hardly likely they would."

"Just before I left the ranch, when it looked like a storm was coming before many hours, the phone rang. It was somebody calling from town. The man wouldn't give his name. But he said that he was willing to lay five to one that no fence would be cut during the storm. Then he hung up."

"Any idea who was talking?"

"It sounded," said Taylor Banning, "like the voice of Will Sheppard."

BOB RUTLEDGE and Ab Adams sat on their cots in a jail cell. The big cattleman was raging with anger. Ab Adams sat on his bunk, smoking thin cigarettes, scowling at the jail wall.

"Git aholt of Will Sheppard!" barked Bob Rutledge for the hundredth time as the deputy in charge of the cow-town jail appeared. "The law has no right tuh hold us here. Send a man out to round up that whisky-guzzlin' fool. I want action. I want out of here."

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"All right, Bob," said the big deputy, "I'll try to locate Shep. But tryin' to locate him is like huntin' for a needle in a haystack. I'll see what I can do."

"If you can't find Shep, get aholt of Judge Burkes. He'll straighten this out."

"The judge has gone to Helena, Bob. Somethin' about the grand jury. Him and the district attorney got called up there on this here same land business they got you bogged down in. Bob, you know I'd turn yuh loose in a minute if I had the right. But I can't. My hands is tied. I had tuh serve them bench warrants on yuh. You should 'a' been in the court at Helena a week ago. A man's got to do what he's told when he's holdin' down an office like mine. You know that, Bob. With the judge an' the D. A. up at Helena till Tuesday, an' this bein' Saturday, it looks like nobody, not even Shep, kin spring yuh free. Yuh orter be glad yo're in here where it's nice an' warm, with that blizzard outside. She's a rip-snorter. Bet she's pilin' cattle down into them bad lands. Bet that she'll last——"

Bob Rutledge's face was red with pent-up rage. He stood there, big hands clenched, trapped, helpless. Not even Bob Rutledge could break jail.

"Git Shep," he barked hoarsely, interrupting the garrulous deputy. "Drag him here, if yuh have to, but git 'im."

"I'll do what I kin, Bob," promised the big, slow-motioned deputy. "Here's a quart I fetched over, just in case you needed it."

Ab Adams was on his feet with a smooth, lithe movement. He grabbed the bottle in his lean, claw-like hand.

"A man needs a snort in a storm like this, even if he's inside," said the deputy as he walked away.

Ab Adams looked sourly at Bob Rutledge, who was pacing the short length of the jail cell.

"Just as well take 'er easy, Bob. Can't do a thing about it."

"I'll bust outta here if I have tuh tear the place apart," growled big Bob Rutledge. "I'll show 'em who I am. Jailin' a man on a fool land deal. Fraudulent land claiming. Who do they think they're handlin', anyhow? And here we got them boys waitin' at the line camp. Wire cutters ready. Just the storm we was waitin' for."

"And Shep's not smart enough tuh keep us outta jail," said Ab Adams, pulling the cork. "Yuh better hire a new shyster, Bob. Shep's gone kinda stale on yuh. He's had a brain but he keeps it pickled in whisky. Better hire a smart shyster. Some gent like Ike Markson."

"Ike Markson?" Bob Rutledge quit pacing the floor. "Ike Markson? The Butte lawyer that won them big cases last year? Kick Shep out?"

"He ain't helped us much since they put us in here last night, Bob. Where is he? Why ain't he showed up?"

"I wish I knowed." Bob Rutledge chewed on a cold cigar. There was a savage look in his gray-blue eyes.

"Gimme one guess an' I'd say he was drunk somewheres, sittin' in a poker game. And us locked up here with that fence deal just right tuh handle. Bob, Shep's lost his luck. Ike Markson kin work him into a knot, comes to law."

"Mebbe yes. Mebbe no. They claim Markson is a world-beater," replied Bob Rutledge. "Still, if it wasn't for Shep——"

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THEY heard the clang of the outside door, and the sound of footsteps coming down the corridor. Then Will Sheppard stood outside the bars of the jail "tank."

"Greetings, Robert. I heard you'd changed hotels. And as I live and breathe, there's the jovial Abilene Adams."

"Where—where——"

"Calm yourself, Robert. Have I ever failed you? Have I ever misled you? Have I ever deceived you in any way, shape or form? I grieve to see you and the jocular Abbie Adams in the bastile, and I've already made a motion to get you out."

"Then get that deputy tuh unlock the door," shouted the irate Bob.

"My powers of persuasion, Robert, do not extend that far. It takes a court order to free you. And the judge won't return from Helena until Tuesday. All this is a bit irregular, and we'll profit by it when we go before the grand jury. They had no authority to get you in here on a bench warrant. There are one or two other little discrepancies that will tend to strengthen our case. Have patience. I'll send over the best of food—drinks—whatever you desire. I might even get you some poker partners.

"Be grateful for the warmth of this friendly bastile, Robert. Outside, the elements are tempestuous. A storm rages. The wind blows. The snow drifts and swirls. Man and beast are suffering in yonder storm—caught in its icy grip, carried on to a white death—buried beneath a snowy balnket. Ah, be grateful Robert that——"

"You're drunk!" growled Bob Rutledge. "Drunk as a hoot owl. Git out and don't ever come around me again with your drunken speeches. Yo're fired! I'm done with yuh. Not quite done, neither. I'll put yuh back in the gutter I drug yuh out of. Hear that, yuh whisky head? I'm trompin' yuh down in the bog hole I snaked yuh out of. Now git outta here. Tell the deputy to fetch a pen and a telegraph blank. I'm sendin' a wire tuh Ike Markson in Butte."

Shep stiffened. He stood there like a man who has been suddenly, without warning, slapped across the face.

"You mean that, Robert?" he asked quietly.

"I mean it. Clear out. Send me yore bill. Git out."

Will Sheppard looked at Bob Rutledge. Then his eyes, a little bleak, looked at Ab Adams who sat there, smoking one of his thinly rolled brown-paper cigarettes.

"Thank you, Abilene," he said.

Then he walked back along the corridor. He delivered Bob Rutledge's message to the deputy, then was let out, out into the blizzard.

As Will Sheppard made his way up the street through the storm, along the snow-packed plank sidewalk, he stumbled his way along, like a man stricken blind. Under his heavy overcoat his shoulders were stooped. He turned into the first saloon.

AT the BB camp south of the drift fence, Taylor Banning faced Joe Slocum. Joe Slocum was one of the Banning clan—a fourth or fifth cousin, or something like that.

A tall, well-made, handsome young cowboy was Joe Slocum. His hair was black and straight, like the hair of the Bannings. But his eyes were pale-gray. His features were well-made, but when he smiled—even when he smiled at Georgia Banning—the smile held no warmth.

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Joe Slocum had been raised by the Bannings after his father had been killed in the Banning-Rutledge feud twenty years ago. Chalk, or perhaps it was Bob Rutledge, had killed Joe Slocum's father down in Texas. Left motherless when small, Joe had been orphaned by his father's death. Taylor Banning then had taken Joe into his home and had raised him as his own son. He had been educated. He owned an interest in the BB outfit, for his father had been part owner of the Texas spread.

Joe Slocum was rated as a crack shot, a dangerous man in any sort of fight, and a fast cowboy wherever he was put. He had been expelled from college in his sophomore year for slapping a professor. He had never returned. Wild in some ways was Joe Slocum. It had been sort of understood that some day Joe Slocum would marry Georgia Banning.

"Joe," said Taylor Banning, "you've had charge of the outfit here at the drift fence. I want to know if you hired a man that rides Block R horses and draws Block R pay. He's a killer. Big man with sandy whiskers and a scar across his forehead. Has two fingers missing on his left hand. I think he calls himself Crowe. Did you hire him?"

"Crowe? Never heard of him, Taylor. Why should I hire any Block R men?" He smiled at the older man. "What's the joke?"

"I never yet caught you in an out-and-out lie, Joe," replied Taylor Banning, looking hard into Joe Slocum's pale-gray eyes, "but I don't trust you too far. I hope you ain't lyin' about this man Crowe."

Joe Slocum's face flushed a little under its deep tan. "I know you've never quite forgiven me, Taylor, for monkeying around with those wet cattle down in Texas. But that's five years ago. And I killed those two Mexicans in self-defense."

"Yeah. Over a cheap little dance-hall girl in Juarez. Took the best lawyer we could get, a lot of money, and no little political pull in Mexico to keep you from being lined up against the dobe wall and shot."

"I was wild then. Five years changes a man."

"He grows older," admitted Taylor Banning briefly. "So you didn't hire this Crowe bushwhacker to kill somebody—young Brad Rutledge, for instance?"

"I never even saw Brad Rutledge," said Joe Slocum. "Did Crowe kill him?"

"No. But he nearly got me. My horse jumped just in time. Crowe wasn't laying for me. The light was bad. Almost dark. He was drunk. And I was coming along a trail that young Rutledge had been using when he was out rawhiding. I reckon he mistook me for Brad Rutledge, or perhaps Bob Rutledge. Most likely he mistook me for Brad. Somebody hired that dirty snake. He hinted that it might be our outfit. You sure you haven't something to do with this, Joe?"

"Why should I want Brad Rutledge killed?"

Taylor Banning's eyes narrowed. "Georgia," he said curtly.

Joe Slocum laughed shortly. "In which case, Taylor, I'd do my own killin'. You'd oughta know that. I don't hire bushwhackers to do my private fightin'."

"I hope," said Taylor Banning, "that you ain't lying. Tracy and I have done our best to make a man of you. We've kept our promise to your father as best we could."

"I appreciate all you've done—you and Tracy. But if you can't

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believe me, can't take my word for something, it's time I saddled up and drifted on." His voice was brittle with anger.

"Keep your shirt on, Joe. I hope I'm wrong. I'll take your word for it. Forget it."

He held out his hand, and Joe Slocum took it.

"I'd like to meet this Crowe," said Joe. "What happened to him, Taylor?"

"He's at Brad Rutledge's place. I'm sending a sled down to take him to town. Crowe's wounded pretty badly. May die."

"I'd like to go down with the sled. I'd like to have a talk with that gentleman."

"The sled starts first thing in the morning. Go along if you want to. Fetch him here to the camp. It's on the way to town, anyhow."

Taylor Banning went back into the lighted bed tent, leaving Joe Slocum standing out in the dark, in the lee of the mess wagon. The darkness hid the faint, grim smile on Joe Slocum's face.

Taylor Banning, inside the warm tent, met Tracy Banning's inquiring glance.

"I'm sending Joe down with the sled. He'll go horseback. I hate not to trust him. He asked to go."

CHAPTER IX.

MURDER.

THE storm was drifting cattle down into the bad lands. The north wind drove its snowstorm down from the hills. Hundreds of head of cattle were drifting in the blizzard. It was the worst storm in years. At both the Block R and BB camps men huddled around the stove, for neither horse nor man could buck that blizzard.

In some places cattle were crowded against the drift fence. Other cattle, storm-driven, piled in on them. They piled up. And those that came behind walked over the frozen carcasses buried in the drifts that covered the fence. Nature was doing that work which Bob Rutledge and Ab Adams had planned. Nature had covered the drift fence under its packed drifts that blanketed dead cattle. And the other cattle, drifting with the blizzard, found shelter in the bad lands.

Chalk and Brad worked desperately, shoveling hay, clearing off the level ground with a snow plow. They made superhuman effort to take care of the weak cattle and shove on the big steers and strong cows that drifted down out of the bad lands.

"Only thing to do, Chalk, is cut what weak stuff we kin into the feed corral, then drift the other stuff across the river into the bad lands."

They ate breakfast in the dark and were in the saddle at daybreak. They had left firewood in the cabin for the wounded man and left him coffee and cooked grub.

"We'll be back about dark," Brad told him. "There's a thousand head o' cattle driftin' down outta the brakes. You kin make out, I reckon."

"Gimme my jug," said the wounded man, "and you kin stay away a week."

Chalk had glared at the man. "Talk, an' yuh git yo' jug. Talk, Mistah Snake."

"Give him his jug, Chalk," said Brad. "Let him have it. He's sick. Give it to him."

"Ah'd lak to make 'at snake talk," growled Chalk, as he put the jug within reach of the wounded man.

The wounded man looked at Brad from his bloodshot eyes. Since Tay-

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lor Banning's departure the morning before, Brad had kept Chalk from torturing the truth from the bushwhacker.

"Mebbeso, Rutledge," said the wounded man who called himself Crowe, "I'll do some talkin' when you git back. I'll tell you this much. It was you I was layin' for. I was paid to run you off or kill yuh. You've acted like a white man, Brad. I'm glad things turned out this way. Chalk could cut off the soles of my feet an' never a whimper would he git. But you've acted white, and to-night I might tell yuh a story."

"I'd like to hear it," said Brad grimly. "Don't hit that jug too hard, Crowe. That's all the booze in camp. You'll need it on the trip out. So long. See yuh to-night about dark."

And so they had left the man. They handled cattle all day, a seemingly endless string that drifted with the storm. Chalk, who hated cold weather, cursed the blizzard in a muttered, monotonous undertone as they drifted the cattle into the shelter of the bad lands across the frozen river.

Snow filled their eyes and nostrils. The wind froze their faces. Their hands and feet were like lumps of frozen clay. But they never quit. For the winter days are short, and there was work to do.

Only when darkness was creeping in on them did they head their leg-weary horses into the teeth of the storm, bound for their home camp. Heads bowed against the storm, they urged their horses across the ice and up the north bank of the river, on across the hay meadow to the barn. There was a little slackening in the blizzard, and Brad, as he unsaddled, looked toward the cabin. It was just about dark now.

"Kinda odd that Crowe feller ain't lit a light." And as a feeling of uneasiness came over him, he left Chalk to throw hay to their horses and plowed his way through the drifting, swirling snow to the cabin.

HE opened the cabin door slowly, almost fearfully. He sensed that something was wrong inside. His right hand gripped his gun. A sound behind him jerked him around. It was Chalk, with a gun in his hand.

Chalk pushed Brad aside and kicked open the door. Chalk's swift push had sent Brad sprawling backward. By the time he was on his feet, Chalk had struck a match with his left hand. Now he touched the match flame to a candle wick. The candle flame flickered and guttered. Big Chalk, crouched like an animal, his gun in his hand, white eyeballs rolling, was staring around the cabin. Brad came in.

The fire in the stove had gone out, though the cabin was still fairly warm. Lying on his back on Chalk's tarp-covered bed near the stove, lay Crowe. Blood covered the tarp and the man's chest and thigh. The bandages had been ripped off. The man was dead. Near him lay the jug, on its side—empty.

Brad lighted the lantern to make more light in the cabin. He bent over the dead man. There was a twisted grimace on the man's mouth. He lay in a twisted position, half off the tarp.

"Looks like he got crazy drunk, Chalk, and killed himself by jerkin' off the bandages and lettin' himself bleed to death."

"Hold 'at light clostah, Mistah Brad. Down neah 'at shouldah wound. Yessuh, lak that. M-m-m-m. Dawg! Looky at 'at wound. It's done been gouged open wif a knife.

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Ah knows mah knife cuttin'. Whah at's de butchah knife? Lemme look at 'at butchah knife."

Brad fetched the knife from the cupboard. The blade was wiped clean, but there was blood on the handle. Chalk, rolling his eyes, looked across the dead man at Brad.

"This mawnin' Ah done washed 'em dishes an' dried 'em clean. How come 'is heah knife git mussed up wif blood 'at a way? Dawg, 'is heah Crowe man nevah got 'at knife off 'at cupboard she'f. Nossuh. He kain't stand up fo' tuh reach 'at she'f. Been somebody heah. Yessuh. Ah seen sign at de stable. 'Is heah Crowe man nevah killed hisse'f. Somebody done 'at job fo' him!"

Now Brad could see signs of a terrific struggle—an overturned chair, blood spattering the log walls and the dirt floor. And there was a lump and a deep cut on the dead man's head that had not been there before.

"Somebody knocked him on the head, Chalk, then bled him to death. The poor, wounded devil put up a fight, but he was too much handicapped by his wounds. Whoever did this shore needs hangin'."

"Listen!"

Chalk was near the door in a single leap, his gun in his hand. Brad stepped in behind the stove, blowing out the candle flame.

From outside came the sounds of shots and a man calling. There were three shots in rapid succession—a pause—three more shots—another pause—three more shots.

"Somebody signalin'," said Brad. "Lost, I reckon, or hurt."

He started for the door, but Chalk barred his way.

"Go easy. Mought be 'at's a trap. Bushwhackin' trap. 'At Crowe man been murdered no mo' than three houahs ago. Lemme tend to 'is heah business. Ol' Chalk savvies 'em games."

Now, from a much closer distance, came three shots, then a man's muffled hail.

"This way with the sled! I found the barn! This way, men! Halloo, Rutledge! Halloo! Show a light! It's Joe Slocum of the BB. We're bringin' a sled to carry out that wounded man"

"Ah'll meet 'im at de bahn," said Chalk, taking the unlighted lantern. Ah trusts no Slocum. Not ol' Chalk. Directly Ah finds out whut's whut, Ah lights 'is heah lante'n. Yuh-all stay inside heah. Don't open 'at do' till Ah hollahs 'Open up.'"

Chalk's black palm blotted out the single candle flame. The cabin was in darkness at the giant Negro let himself outside. Brad heard his bellowing voice.

"Ah's goin' tuh pilot yuh, Joe Slocum! Ah's got cat eyes whut sees in de dahk, so don' go tryin' no foolishness. Yuh-all keep hollerin' jes' de same. Mah gun's in mah hand, so be keerful."

Brad waited there in the cabin, tense, gun ready. Murder had been

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done inside these log walls—cold-blooded, cowardly murder. A queer feeling crept up Brad's spine. He was no coward, but there was something stealthy, hidden, deadly about it all.

It seemed a year before Chalk's voice hailed the cabin.

"Open up, Mistah Brad!"

CHALK ushered in three men. They looked half frozen. Brad started the fire. Chalk motioned the three men over toward Brad's bunk.

"Lay yo' guns on the table an' keep wha' at Ah tells yuh-all. Ol' Chalk taken no chances wid a Slocum."

"No need of all that precaution," said Joe Slocum, as he put his white-handled gun on the table. "We're on an errand of mercy, Chalk. The weather's too rotten for fightin'. We're about froze. Almost lost the trail, the drifts were so bad. Nothin' but luck let us get here. Where's the wounded man?"

Brad pointed to the dead man. "Looks like you had the trip for nothin', Slocum. The feller's dead."

Joe Slocum stared at the dead man. "Didn't he work for your outfit, Rutledge?"

"He worked for the Block R," said Brad.

He was studying the other as Joe Slocum took off his cap and fur coat. Now Joe Slocum met Brad's scrutiny with a faint smile.

"So you're Brad Rutledge. I've heard about you. My fiancée told me how you fished her out of the creek."

"Yore what?"

"My fiancée. The girl I'm marrying in June—Georgia Banning. Which reminds me, I was to deliver a message for her. She showed me the letter you wrote her. Nice letter, and all that, but a little bit out of place. She gave it to me to return to you. And she wanted me to tell you that it would be impossible for several reasons, for her to see you again. She was just trying to be kind to you that day you rode to town together after Taylor Banning and Bob Rutledge put on the duel. And she was pretty much upset and bewildered I reckon when she promised to see you again. Here's the letter."

Joe Slocum's voice was cold. His smile was the smile of a gambler—meaningless, unless there was in it the hint of a threat.

Brad's face was a little white as he took the letter and stuffed it into his pocket. He remembered the wording of the letter, how he had reminded her of the kiss that had sealed their promise always to be friends. Her lips against his had promised more than friendship. And she had shown this letter that belonged only to her and to Brad, to Joe Slocum, who claimed he was going to marry her in June. Brad's hurt now became a cold anger. He stared hard into Joe Slocum's pale-gray eyes.

"I'll take what message Georgia has to send, only from her. And I'm goin' to see her the first chance I git. This is the first time I ever met you, Slocum. But I've heard of yuh some. You an' yore men is under my roof, and I'll have to put up with yuh till to-morrow. Then yuh'll pull out. Till then, I kin do without any talk from yuh. Savvy?"

"I'm not deaf. But you'll listen to this much, Rutledge. If ever I catch you even talking to Georgia Banning, I'll shoot you. And you'd better not try to get in touch with her. It would be bad luck."

"I'll risk the bad luck," said Brad.

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CHALK was staring at Joe Slocum's clothes. Now he spoke in a low, growling voice. "How come 'at blood on yo' clothes, Slocum?"

Joe Slocum's smile was mocking. "Blood? I shot a blacktail buck this afternoon. Thought we might get snowed in and need meat. In sticking the animal, I reckon I got a little bloody. Why?"

" 'Is heah Crowe man——"

"Died with his boots on," said Joe Slocum. "He bushwhacked Taylor Banning. Taylor didn't want to kill him. He fetched him here and left him. Said he'd send back a sled, and he kept his word. I heard Taylor remark that the wounded man was afraid you'd kill him, Chalk. Well, the man's dead. And there's blood on your overalls and shirt. And likewise I don't need glasses to see the blood spots on Brad Rutledge's clothes. I come down through a blizzard with two men and a sled to fetch back a wounded man. I find the man dead, the bandages ripped from his wounds, and blood all over the place. You two might have to talk fast when you come up for trial. I wouldn't care to be in your boots."

Joe Slocum turned from Chalk to Brad Rutledge.

"Rutledge, it will be duty, not pleasure, that will keep me here longer than you expect. A murder has been done here. I'm sending one of my men back in the morning to bring the sheriff and the coroner. That dead man mustn't be touched."

"Yuh mean," said Brad, his voice strained, "that me and Chalk will be accused o' murderin' Crowe?"

"Glad you're bright enough," said Joe Slocum, "to get the idea. Murder has been done in this cabin since Taylor Banning left here. The wounded man, remember, was left in your care. His wounds were painful but not mortal. Not even dangerous if he was properly taken care of. I want this man's body to be left as it is. Nothing in the cabin is to be touched, except what must be used for cooking the meals. I'm in charge here, strange as that may seem." And from his pocket Joe Slocum took a metal badge.

"Special deputy, Rutledge. I'm the law here in this cabin. I mean business. You and Chalk are under arrest, charged with murder. And now I'll reclaim my gun and the guns of the two men I'm deputizing to help me. Chalk, you and Brad Rutledge will surrender your guns to me. You're both under arrest."

Chalk's blue-barreled gun slid into view. "Ol' Chalk ain' givin' his gun to no Slocum. Reach fo' 'at white-handled smoke pole o' youhn an' Ah'll make a sieve outta yo' cahcass."

"Yore badge don't weigh much right now," said Brad, "and yuh ain't arrestin' nobody. You an' yore two men set down on the floor. And if yuh don't stay set, we'll hog tie yuh. Come daylight, Slocum, yuh kin send a man for the sheriff an' coroner. I'll stake him to a horse tuh ride. But you ain't arrestin' nobody with that tin star. Chalk, ride herd on 'em while I build some biscuits. I'm still runnin' my own ranch. Set down, Slocum, before I knock yuh down!"

CHAPTER X.

WILL SHEPPARD, SHYSTER.

WILL SHEPPARD leaned against the bar, his eyes a little glazed, a tall glass of raw whisky in his hand. He couldn't remember when he had eaten or slept, except that it was

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just before he went to the jail to visit Bob Rutledge and Ab Adams. That was the second day of the blizzard. Now the storm was over. He turned to the bartender.

"How long did the storm last?"

"Four days and three nights, Shep. Cleared up this mornin'."

Shep thanked him with a nod and sipped the raw whisky. He wondered when Bob Rutledge would strike. When would Bob Rutledge come out with the facts of Shep's past? When would he come into the open and declare himself? When would he tell State officials that Will Sheppard was an ex-convict and therefore barred from practicing law in the State of Montana? When would he bare the facts that would send Will Sheppard back to the State's prison in New Mexico? When?

"It don't matter," said Shep, without realizing that he spoke aloud.

"Uh? What don't matter, Shep?" asked the bartender.

"The storm's over," Shep replied, and something of the old sparkle came into his eyes. "And that's all that matters for the present." He chuckled softly.

"Robert and the genial Abilene locked in the bastile for the duration of the storm. And you could hear dear Robert roar from here to Jericho when he learned that the charges against him had been faked. E'en as the austere and learned judge and the estimable district attorney learned that their summons to the State capital was phony. And the slimy, oily-haired Isaac Markson perspiring like a man in a Turkish bath, blowing like a porpoise. Dear Abilene with a face like a death mask and eyes that slayed with a single glance. Never, never in my whole checkered career have I ever witnessed the equal of that scene when the roaring Robert and the silent Abilene came up in court this morning. Or was it yesterday morning?

"There was the good judge, red-faced. The D. A., white-lipped. Robert roaring blatant threats. The slimy Ike Markson armed with writs and volumes of Blackstone and mouthing threats concerning the false arrest and imprisonment of his clients. The tight-lipped Ab Adams sitting like a menace to one and all, silent, bitter-eyed. Never, even if I go unhung and live to be a million, shall I ever forget it all.

"Another long rye, doctor. Gad, what a court scene!"

"Ain't yuh had enough, Shep?"

"Enough? Never, doctor, never."

"There's a room in back, Shep. Good bed in it. Nobody ever uses it but me. Yuh need some shut-eye. I'll stake yuh to a pint, and when yuh git flopped, I'll send yuh in some milk toast an' a can o' cold tomatoes and a pot o' black coffee. You been on a bad un, Shep. Never seen a man drink so much without grub or sleep, and I've seen a million an' more good upstandin' drinkin' men in my time. Shep, yo're beddin' down if I have tuh put yuh to sleep with the bung starter. This is yore last rye at the bar. The pint will come in handy when yuh wake up."

"Doctor," said Shep, "you're a friend in need and all that, but I'm waiting for something—something of importance."

"I'll call yuh if anything turns up, Shep. Come on, now."

The saloon man half led, half carried Shep to the private back room. He put the weary-eyed attorney to bed, and even before he left the room, Shep was dead to the world.

The big bartender smiled as he turned the key in the lock on the

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outside and pocketed it. The third rye back had held a few drops of something that the saloon man had got from the town doctor. Shep was good for a sleep that would last at least twelve hours.

BACK behind the bar, the bartender polished a glass and held it against the light that filtered in above the swinging doors. He was thinking of Will Sheppard. He liked Shep. But, then, most people liked Shep, despite his faults and his failings. Shep was that sort of man. His false gayety, with its subtle undercurrent of wistfulness that attracted pity; the fact that Shep was anything but a well man; that, with his cough, he was living on borrowed time—all went to make for the sympathy and tolerance of even some of his enemies. Shep never had made denial of the fact that his law methods were not always ethical. He had felt the lash of contempt from more than one judge. Other attorneys snubbed him, maligned him. And to a man they feared Will Sheppard.

Time after time, when he was apparently losing a difficult case, he would pull from his bag of tricks something that would win him the decision.

"Will Sheppard," a great jurist once said of him, "might have attained the peak of fame. Instead, he sold out for a mess of pottage. His is the sort of legal mind that one might compare to the scalpel in the hands of a great surgeon. But unfortunately, Will Sheppard neglects to sterilize that scalpel."

Shep had been sleeping less than two hours when the sheriff brought in Brad Rutledge and Chalk, charged with the murder of a man named Crowe.

The saloon man got the news from the sheriff, who dropped in for a hot toddy. And when the sheriff had departed, the burly saloon man concocted a drink which he carried to the back room.

Half an hour later Will Sheppard, sober, a little bit shaky, left the saloon by the rear door. At his cabin he shaved, took a cold tub bath, and dressed.

On his way to the jail he met Ike Markson and Bob Rutledge and Ab Adams, who had just got off the train and were on their way to the hotel. He passed them with a quirk of an eyebrow and a twisted smile. They did not speak to him as they passed.

The sheriff was at the jail. He looked at Shep and nodded. He looked worried.

"I'm representing Brad Rutledge and Chalk, sheriff. You brought them in. Who is in charge of Brad's place?"

"I left three good men in charge, Shep. Men I can trust."

"Banning men, sheriff?"

"No."

"Block R men?"

"I said they were men I can trust, didn't I? Not Banning men. Not Block R men. I've been a peace officer here in Montana for twenty years, Shep. Knowed all kinds of men. Brad Rutledge ain't any murderer. He's not guilty, but things look bad. Looks like the deck's stacked against him. And there's one man, only one man, can clear the boy.

"Look here, Shep. I felt kinda sore about you gettin' Bob Rutledge and Ab Adams jailed. And it was only when I studied over the deal that I seen through what you'd done. I'm a blunt man, Shep. Don't talk with fancy words. We both know what you've done for Bob Rutledge. And I reckon I know

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what yo're up against. Shep, there's a joker in the deck somewheres. Anything I can do, or you can do, let's work together on this. Now go on in and talk to Brad and Chalk."

FOR more than two hours Shep sat in the jail cell, talking to Brad and Chalk—questioning them, jotting down notes, going over the same ground time after time in a studied endeavor to bring out every bit of information that would have a bearing on the case. At last he pocketed his notebook and got to his feet.

"You'll both be better off right in here than on the street. Play rummy or checkers for a few days. Keep your traps shut. Talk to nobody. It's a tough case, but we'll lick it. I'll drop in again. To-night, perhaps, or next week sometime. It all depends upon how things break for me. All you two have to think about is a checker game. I'll do the worrying. Just sit tight."

In the front of the jail, sitting in the office, talking to the sheriff, Shep found Ike Markson and Bob Rutledge. Markson smiled silkily. Bob Rutledge scowled. Shep quirked an eyebrow and addressed the sheriff.

"I'm the legal attorney for Brad Rutledge and Chalk, sheriff," he said blandly. "And as their legal adviser I've cautioned them not to talk to any one. No visitors are to be allowed unless I give my permission. I'm well within my legal rights in making such a rule. I'm sending 'em over a turkey dinner with trimmings. Take good care of 'em, sheriff."

Bob Rutledge got to his feet, his face red with anger. He barred Shep's way.

"Kinda high an' mighty, ain't yuh, Sheppard?"

"Give my attitude any name you can lay your tongue to, Robert. I'm Brad's attorney. Any communication you have to make, put it through me. You'll find me at my cabin or at the Silver Dollar Saloon."

Bob Rutledge faced the sheriff.

"I'm Brad's father, sheriff. This drunken bum has no right to do what he's doin'. He's drunk now. Look at him. I've fetched a real lawyer tuh talk to Brad."

"Turn Isaac in that cell with Brad," said Shep, "and he'll emerge looking like he'd slapped a grizzly in the face. Perhaps, Markson, you neglected to tell Robert that Brad ran you off his place a week or so before things began to happen down there. When Brad comes up for his hearing, you'll be called as a material witness. Dwell on that to-night, brother Markson.

"Gentlemen, I bid you good day. Sheriff, the turkey dinner will be over here in about an hour. The cigars are for Chalk, not for the deputy on duty. And if there is a wee bottle hidden under the napkin, that, also, is for Chalk. I'm sending over a deck of cards, some books, and a checkerboard. And remember, my clients are to see nobody. Adios."

Outside, Shep's mocking smile vanished. He walked briskly down the street to the hotel, not even pausing at the Silver Dollar. The hotel man nodded.

"How are you, Shep?"

"Finer'n frog's hair. Is Taylor Banning in town?"

"He got in half an hour ago."

"Is he in his room?"

"He is, Shep. But he's busy. Tracy Banning and Joe Slocum are up there. They left orders not to be disturbed."

Shep smiled as he read the num-

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ber of Taylor Banning's room. Then, whistling softly, he mounted the wide stairway. A few moments later he was rapping at the door of Taylor Banning's room.

The murmur of voices inside stopped. Then the voice of Taylor Banning cut the silence.

"See who's there, Joe. Whoever it is, tell 'em we're busy and can't see anybody."

Joe Slocum opened the door. He scowled at the attorney.

"It's you, is it? Well, run along and peddle your papers, Sheppard. We're busy."

HE would have slammed the door, but Shep's foot was wedged against it. Ignoring Joe Slocum's threatening attitude, he called out in no small-toned voice:

"If you're a man, Taylor Banning, come out here in the hall. Alone. It's Will Sheppard."

"Let him in," sounded Taylor Banning's voice. And reluctantly Joe Slocum admitted the smiling Will Sheppard.

Tracy Banning was sitting on the edge of a bed, pulling on his town boots. Taylor Banning was in the bathroom, shaving. It was a large room with three beds. Muddy, service-worn boots and canvas overalls were on the floor. A six-gun lay on the dresser. Fur coats, muskrat caps, four-buckle overshoes, Angora chaps, fur-lined mittens, gun holsters, and cartridge belts littered the huge room that was the town home of the Bannings. A sawed-off shotgun leaned against the wall at the head of one bed. There was a half-emptied bottle of whisky on the dresser, near the six-gun.

Shep, without waiting for an invitation, headed for the bottle as Joe Slocum locked the door.

TRACY BANNING

Tracy Banning looked at Shep with cold indifference. Taylor Banning, one half of his face white with lather, an open razor in his hand, stepped out of the bathroom.

"Hello, Sheppard. Help yourself to the whisky. Then find a chair. I wanted to see you."

"Thanks. For once we share a mutual wish. Do I drink alone?"

"So far as I'm concerned," said Tracy Banning, pulling on the tight-fitting shop-made boot, "you'll always drink alone."

"And by the same token, I'll be drinking in good company," replied Shep, pouring a generous drink into a water tumbler.

"When I scrape this side of my face, Sheppard," said Taylor Banning in a tone that was just a little too gentle, "I'll join you. If you can wait."

"It will be a pleasure to wait."

Taylor Banning stood there in the doorway. Without the aid of a mirror, in a few quick strokes of the open razor, he was shaved. He washed his face with a steaming towel and came into the room.

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There was no sign of welcome on his face or in his eyes. He poured himself a drink. Standing there in pants and boots and undershirt, suspenders dangling, he raised his glass.

"Here's how, Sheppard."

"How."

And they drank.

"And now, Sheppard, what fetches you here?" asked Taylor Banning as Shep took a chair.

"A little matter that must be discussed in private," said Shep, "or not at all."

"Very well. I'll be dressed in a minute."

Tracy Banning grunted as he pulled on his other boot. Then he looked at Shep with a faint smile.

"So Ike Markson has your job of keeping Bob Rutledge out of the pen, has he, Sheppard?" he said.

"So I've been told," replied Shep, his left eyebrow lifted.

"Leaves you out in the cold, don't it?"

"I'd hardly put it that way, Banning. There are worse places than what you term out in the cold. Bob Rutledge fired me, yes. But I haven't had to beg on the streets yet." He reached for the bottle.

TAYLOR Banning put on a flannel shirt and tied his tie. He slipped into a coat and buckled on his belt. Deliberately he examined his gun before he shoved it into the tied holster on his thigh.

"Where do we go, Sheppard, for this private talk?"

"We might go down to my cabin," suggested Shep.

"It's a trap," said Joe Slocum. "Don't be a fool, Taylor."

"I'll risk that," returned Taylor Banning. "If I'm not back in an hour from now, Tracy, look for me at Sheppard's cabin."

"Do that," said Shep amiably, "and I'll trot out a bottle of twenty-year-old stuff that I swiped from Bob Rutledge."

As they passed through the lobby, they almost bumped into Bob Rutledge and Ab Adams. The big cattleman glared at the pair, and Shep smiled crookedly. Ab's face was a mask, and his eyes glittered with smoldering hatred. Shep chuckled as he opened the door for Taylor Banning.

"The amiable Abilene is perturbed," he said as they walked up the street, headed for Shep's log cabin at the edge of town. "And as for Robert, he's having chills and fever. Ab Adams would rather kill me than—— Never mind. Whisky talk, Banning. Just whisky talk."

They reached the cabin. Shep made a fire in the stone fireplace. He brought out cigars and a decanter and glasses. Taylor Banning looked around the room. There were books on the crude shelves—rare editions, bound in hand-tooled leather. The few etchings and paintings were well-chosen. There was an old Bible there on the table, also a framed tintype of a man and woman, the woman seated, the man standing by her side—probably Shep's father and mother. The Navajo rugs were clean. Things were in order. A man felt at home here as he dropped into one of the big leather chairs in front of the open fire.

Taylor Banning looked at Shep. Shep quirked an eyebrow and filled their glasses from the cut-glass decanter that belonged to a past decade.

"I can't figure you, Sheppard," said Taylor Banning.

"Don't try to. It would be a wasted effort. I've put in many years telling just that to Bob Rutledge. Here's how."

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"What do you want of me, Sheppard?" asked Taylor Banning.

"I want you to help me clear Brad Rutledge and Chalk. I had a talk with them at the jail. They're innocent. That man Crowe was killed by some one else. Crowe was killed because somebody was afraid he'd talk. Have you any idea who might have committed that murder?"

"I'd be a fool to say so, Sheppard, even if I knew. I'll be called upon to testify. And I'll have to tell the truth. I'll be compelled to say that Crowe was afraid to be left there in that cabin with Brad Rutledge and Chalk."

"And," said Shep, "I suppose you will also add to your testimony that the man Crowe made some rather peculiar accusations before you left the cabin. Banning, if ever I get you and Slocum and Tracy Banning on the witness stand under cross-examination, I'm going to rip you apart. I'll be fighting to save the life of a youngster that's as dear to me as my own son. I'll use every trick that a shyster knows to clear that boy and Chalk. And I think you'll admit that Will Sheppard's black bag holds more than a few tricks. I don't want you to testify."

"Why not?"

"For a reason that you might not quite comprehend. Banning, if you testify against Brad Rutledge, I promise to hang Joe Slocum. As a matter of fact, I hope to see Slocum and Abilene Adams hang together. Birds of a feather should hang together. Let me pour you another little dram. It's twenty years old. It was in the mash when Brad Rutledge was in swaddling clothes."

Taylor Banning sipped his drink.

"Sheppard, what sort of a game are you playing?" he asked.

"A dangerous game, Banning."

"You've broken with Rutledge?"

"Robert fired me. Before he's through, he'll smash me."

"Still you defend his son. Why?"

"You might not understand, Banning, if I attempted to explain. It's something a bit finer than the glory I'd get from winning the case. It is not a question of money. It has to do with the brotherhood of mankind, the love of a fellow man. Even a shyster might, inside his heart, have a little atom of loyalty and love for another man."

"You think a lot of Brad Rutledge?"

"Yes."

"And you want me to withhold any damaging testimony. Is that the idea, Sheppard?"

"Those are the cards laid out on the table, Banning."

"I'll play your game, Sheppard."

"Good. Then I can——"

"On one condition, Sheppard," the cattleman cut in. "Only on one condition. We both know that my testimony might convict Brad Rutledge and the Negro Chalk. The man Crowe had ample reasons for being afraid of Brad Rutledge and Chalk. I might give those reasons on the witness stand, and a jury would believe me. I'll refuse to testify upon one, only one condition."

"Name it," said Shep.

"I need an attorney on this land business, Sheppard. I'm going after Bob Rutledge. You know enough about his land deals to put him on the rack and pull him apart. I'll help you clear Brad Rutledge and Chalk if you will help me send Bob Rutledge where he belongs. I want to see Bob Rutledge locked in prison. You can do the trick without half trying. And if you'll agree to be our attorney and send Bob Rutledge over the road, I'll see to it that Brad Rutledge is going free."

"How about Chalk?"

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"He might have to serve a few years. His past record is against him, of course. Still, if I withhold my damaging testimony, there won't be much against Chalk. Surely you can clear him. Is it a deal, Sheppard?"

"I'm to send Bob Rutledge to the pen?" Shep helped himself to a drink. His eyebrow was quirked, his smile a twisted line.

"Yes. How about it, Sheppard?"

Will Sheppard set down his empty glass. He picked up Taylor Banning's hat and handed it to him. Then he opened the cabin door.

"I've dropped rather low in this world, Banning," he said without heat, "but not low enough to double-cross a man who has befriended me. You erred in your judgment of Will Sheppard, shyster. Get out of here, Taylor Banning."

Taylor Banning stared hard at Shep. The attorney was holding open the door.

"Sheppard, you're shoving your drunken head into a noose," said the cattleman. "I thought you were smart. I find you are just a whisky-guzzling fool. I'll send Brad Rutledge to the pen. I'll hang that Chalk. And you'll be in prison with Bob Rutledge before I'm done with you. Remember what I'm tellin' you now."

"You've taken on quite a job, Banning. You're biting off a big hunk of meat. Watch out that you don't choke. Get out!"

CHAPTER XI.

JAIL BREAK.

IN the jail cell, Shep sat on Brad's bunk. He slid a thin package under Chalk's blankets. When he spoke, his voice was barely audible.

"Hacksaw blades, Chalk. You know how to use 'em. You go out to-night and you'll go back down in the bad lands. Don't kill anybody unless you're crowded. There's a fast horse and guns hidden in the brush. Chalk, you're outlawed from now on. You'll travel the hoot-owl trail till I call you in. But no killings. Not unless they crowd you. And I want you to trail Joe Slocum and Ab Adams. Never mind the Bannings or Bob Rutledge. Slocum and Abilene Adams are the men we want."

"Can't I go with Chalk?" asked Brad.

"No. I'll need you here. Now get the idea I'm putting out. Chalk, you tie Brad up. Gag him. Then make your get-away. You're guilty of murder. You killed Crowe. You tie up Brad to keep him from talking. You're the fall guy, the goat. And you'll keep on being that until I call you in. Brad is simply the innocent victim of circumstances. Later on I'll clear both of you."

"But gosh, Shep," protested Brad, "I can't do that. I can't let Chalk take all the risks. Makes me feel like a weaklin'. Listen, Shep, why can't I——"

Shep's voice cut in with the sharpness of a razor blade. He lost none of his calm, but his words were voicing a pent-up emotion.

"Chalk and I have been through a lot of places, Brad. We're older than you are. I'm bossing this little show. You're under Shep's orders. Chalk goes away to-night. You stay here, and when the time comes, you'll come up for trial. If Chalk came up at the same time, we'd be licked from the start. But if I can't clear you alone, than I'll quit practicing law and—— Never mind what I'll do. Chalk, got everything straight? Understand what you've got to do?"

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"Yes, suh, Mistah Shep."

"Tie him up hard and fast. Gag him. Then get on that horse and hit the trail for the bad lands. Hang on the trail of Ab Adams and Slocum. See what you can see with the field glasses that you'll find on the saddle. If I need you or you need me, you know the signal to give, or how to reach me."

"Gosh, Shep," said Brad, a troubled look in his eyes, "I just can't lay down and let Chalk take the risks. I'd feel like a yellow dog. I just can't go through with it. Let me go with Chalk! Let me go back to the ranch!"

"Chalk," said Shep, "if he makes a fuss, treat him rough. Brad, you young bonehead, I'm dealing this round. You take orders, or Chalk will knock you colder than last winter's ice crop. Don't you trust me, Brad, pardner?"

Brad nodded. "All right, Shep. But it shore makes me feel like I was a coward."

Shep smiled twistedly. "Bricks and stones can break your bones, but names will never even get under your skin if you have courage. Chalk's end of it is the easier part. You're going to hold down the hard end of the job when you come up for hearing. Ask Chalk. I'll ask him. Chalk, which would you rather do, bust out of here and take your chance, or face a jury?"

"Dawg! Yuh dunno how Ah's gonna be feelin' once Ah gits a hoss undah me. Mistah Shep, yuh-all keep ol' Chalk infawmed. Mistah Brad lose 'at trial, 'is heah Chalk goin' tuh teah 'at jail apaht an' make sho' nuf trouble. Ol' Chalk goin' ridin' to-night. Gittin' outta 'is heah jail house. Goin' ridin'. Skunk huntin'. Yes, suh, Mistah Brad, Mistah Shep, he's jus' right. He sure is!"

SHEP stayed there talking for half an hour. Then he shook hands with Chalk and Brad and went on down the street to the hotel. In the lobby he met Ike Markson.

"Greetings, Isaac," he called out jauntily. "Join me in a little liquid refreshment?"

Ike Markson nodded, and they went into the barroom adjoining the hotel lobby.

"How goes the legal profession?" asked Shep, twisting his glass of whisky in his hand.

"I'd like to see your files, Sheppard, and check up on the Rutledge land. Dates, surveys, all the scrip and leased land. It's in a jumble. They have Rutledge in a tight spot, and I must have your coöperation to get anywhere."

"I expected that, Markson. What are you willing to pay?"

"Pay? For papers that belong to my client? Why should it cost me or him a thin dime, Sheppard?"

Shep's left eyebrow lifted. "I asked a question. How much am I bid for the information and papers you need?"

"Not a dollar, Sheppard. You can't bluff me."

"Bluff you? I wouldn't step out of my tracks to bluff you. I don't need to. You don't see my files, Markson. You get nothing from me. Not even a drink."

Shep waved the bartender over. "Put mine on the cuff and collect fifteen cents for this other drink."

Markson glared at the smaller man. Big, oily, swarthy, he clenched his fists. The slender Shep smiled faintly.

"If I were you, Markson, I'd keep my temper under control. Of course, you could knock me cold with one punch. It's been done by smaller men than you. But it

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wouldn't buy you much, Isaac. The bartender happens to be a friend of mine. Ever had a bung starter bounced off that oily head of yours? No? Then I advise you to lay off any sort of violence.

"Not only that, Markson, but if anything happened to me, you'd lose your job. And perhaps a few teeth. Because I've known Bob Rutledge for a long time. He and I have been here and there, thither and yon together. And if it came to a showdown, Robert would kill the man that ever harmed me. He can smash me. That's his privilege. But he'll make it hard on any other man that ever harms Will Sheppard. Think that over. Ponder on it a long time.

"And now, Markson, tuck your yellow tail between your legs and run back to the man that got you your job. Tell Abilene Adams that you couldn't get what you wanted. Tell him that Will Sheppard don't sell out to any man. Tell him that if I'm killed, he'll be following me before the change of the moon. Tell Ab Adams that before I'm done with him he'll wish he'd dug a hole, crawled into it, then pulled the hole in after him. Now clear out before you get tossed out on your oily head."

CHALK sang in a deep, rich-toned voice as he and Brad sawed through the jail bars. There was a white moon outside. Finally Chalk's big hands bent back the bars.

"Dawg!" he cried.

He left Brad alone in the cell, bound hand and foot, and gagged. The youth heard Chalk ride off into the night. Brad thought about his ranch down on the river, and of the cattle to be fed. He thought of his father and Ab Adams and Shep, of the Bannings and Joe Slocum and the murdered man called Crowe. And he thought of Georgia. Had she played him for a fool, as Slocum had said? Or had Slocum lied? Had her promises been clever lies?

The hours until dawn seemed endless. The deputy in charge of the jail looked in a time or two, but Brad made no sound. Chalk's bunk looked all right. The blanket covered a cleverly made dummy. The sawed bars were bent back in place.

Breakfast time brought the deputy again. Brad's arms and legs were numb and swollen from being tied. The gag had rubbed his mouth raw.

"Where's that black man?"

"Chalk high-tailed it. He hog tied me and drifted yonderly. Said he didn't like the board here."

The sheriff got to the jail about the same time that Shep showed up. Shep needed a shave and sleep. He had a haggard look. But he forced a wry smile as he looked at Chalk's empty cot and the sawed bars.

"Looks to me like I've lost a client, sheriff."

"Shep," growled the sheriff, "why don't you just sit down and bust out cryin'? From now on I'll search yuh before you git inside this jail. You know what this'll cost me at election time. It will lick me. The Bannings will see to that."

"Keep your shirt on, sheriff. A lot is going to happen between now and election time. The Bannings might not have so much to say about things."

"I'm swearing out a bench warrant for Chalk."

"Which will worry Chalk as much as a fly bite. By all means, sheriff, swear out a bench warrant. Organize a posse and go after him. The county foots the bill. Your posse will come back to town worn out,

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hungry, half frozen, and empty-handed. Chalk knows his business. You'll never take him alive unless he wants to be brought back. That black panther is the toughest fighter I ever saw go into action, sheriff, and Texas breeds some bad gun handlers. He'd fight the biggest posse you could organize.

"Down in Mexico they'll tell you tales about Chalk that sound like lies, but they aren't. When he was a top sergeant, he could take any five men in the outfit and lick 'em all in the same ring. When Chalk soldiered with Pancho Villa, the Mexican women used to scare their kids by telling 'em that Black Chalk would get 'em. Along the Mexican border the Rangers and the cowpunchers handling wet cattle and running guns will tell you that they'd rather buck a troop of cavalry than to go after Chalk when he's on the prod.

"Sheriff, Chalk didn't kill that Crowe gent. Chalk don't kill crippled men. Go on after him if you think it will do any good. But I'm telling you it won't. You can't find him. So take things easy. Make a bluff at hunting down Chalk if you think it's necessary. But don't trail him too far. You might accidentally locate him, and you'd lose a few men. Now we'll go over and see the judge. I'm asking that Brad Rutledge be brought up for hearing this morning."

"Figure you can get the boy off, Shep?" The sheriff's tone was no longer gruff. He knew that Shep had brains, that Shep seldom made a wrong move in his game.

"Taylor Banning's testimony will put old Chalk in a bad light. But there won't be enough concrete evidence to hold Brad, now that Chalk has flown the coop, leaving Brad tied and gagged. It looks like Chalk is absolutely guilty. They can't hold Brad except as a material witness, and I'll spring him on bond."

"The bond will be a high one, Shep. Who'll furnish it?"

"I'll attend to that. I'll be able to rustle the cash bond. Now let's go over to the judge's home and interrupt his breakfast. By the way, sheriff, have you a deputy that isn't busy?"

"Sure. Why?"

"I have a prisoner for you—a gent that tried to break open my safe last night. He's tied up in my bathtub. The tub is filled with cold water. He's been there since before daylight, cooling off. If he tries to get loose, he's apt to drown."

"What was he after?" gasped the sheriff, staring hard at the attorney.

"He didn't say."

"Money?"

"I have no money to speak of. Everybody knows that. You'll recognize the man. A tinhorn that drifted in a few days ago. I've seen him talking to Ike Markson. Ike is very anxious to get some papers I have. While I have no proof, I can draw my own conclusions."

WELL, Shep?" Bob Rutledge in his hotel room, eyed Will Sheppard coldly as he asked: "What fetches you here?"

"Brad needs a man to go his cash bond, Robert. You were at the courthouse this morning. Are you backing the boy or not?"

"Shep, I told you I was goin' tuh smash yuh. I never broke my word. You quit me in a tight. Brad quit me when I needed him. Now yuh come beggin'. What I said goes as she lays. I ain't puttin' up any cash bond for a lot o' quitters. I'm fightin' them Bannings, and I'll lick 'em. I expected this visit. A beggin' visit. You an' Brad want me to foot

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the bills. No true son o' mine would turn against me like Brad did. Chalk showed a yaller streak. You turned traitor on me. And now you got the nerve tuh come here and ask me tuh go Brad's bond. Git out!"

"That's final, Robert?"

"As final as the pine box that you'll fit before long."

"I was hoping," said Will Sheppard, "that you would keep your word to a woman who died—the mother of your son. But you backed down. If I know anything about human nature, I'd say that Brad would rather hang than accept anything from you now, if he heard what you've said. He won't know. I wouldn't tell him for all the gold in Montana. He didn't know I was coming here. He won't know I came."

From under his coat Shep took a long-barreled six-gun. He smiled grimly at the big cattleman.

"I never thought I'd ever again pack a gun, Robert. But I'm packing it from now on. You can tell that to Ab Adams."

Shep left the hotel and walked down the street to the sheriff's office. The sheriff looked up from some papers he was reading.

"What luck, Shep?"

Shep quirked an eyebrow, smiled, and did a jig step. His eyes were bright, perhaps too bright.

"Everything is lovely, and the goose hangs high, sheriff. When the court opens in the morning, Brad's bond will be posted."

"Glad to hear it, Shep."

"Any news from the bad lands?"

"They lost Chalk's trail. Want to see Brad?"

"I'll be back later, sheriff. About nine o'clock to-night. Have some business to take care of. Tell Brad everything is fixed. How's the bathtub burglar?"

"Still shiverin'. Dog-gone, Shep, he like tuh drowned an' froze in that tub. Yuh shore treated him rough. Tyin' a man up an' puttin' him in a tub, then turnin' on the cold water. And I always figgered you was a harmless sort of duck."

"I am," said Shep, "unless I'm badly crowded. Tell Brad I'm sending over a big steak and shoestring potatoes and trimmings. I'll be over later to see him."

Shep went to his cabin. He took a drink to steady his nerves, then lay down, fully clothed, on his bed, setting his alarm clock for eight thirty.

THE alarm brought him out of a dreamless sleep. He washed his face in cold water, brushed his hair, and pulled on his overcoat. Then he walked over to the jail.

The moon was a round, white disk. The stars were like diamonds sprinkled on black velvet. Underfoot was a white blanket of snow.

The box stove inside the sheriff's office was cherry-red. The sheriff was dozing in a swivel chair behind his desk. He blinked his heavy-lidded eyes, then his jaw dropped. He was looking in the black muzzle of a long-barreled .45. The man who held the gun was masked. He wore a long overcoat.

"Lift 'em high," sounded the muffled voice from behind the heavy black silk muffler that served as a mask. "High, or I'll kill yuh!"

The sheriff obeyed. "What do yuh want?" he growled.

"Now put yore hands around behind an' lay down. Never mind what I want. Lay down there or I'll——"

The sentence was never finished. As the sheriff whirled, a gun rapped him across the head. He went down

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in a limp heap. The masked man tied him hand and foot and locked him in an empty cell. Then he scribbled a short note on a yellow pad.

"We're takin' Brad Rutledge for a horseback ride," he wrote in a scrawling hand. "Foller us and you will not git back."

He left the note on the sheriff's deck, then, with the sheriff's keys, he went back to Brad's cell.

Brad, sitting on the edge of his bunk, saw a man in a long fur coat. The man's face was hidden by a black silk muffler. He held a gun on Brad as he unlocked the door. Brad's fists clenched as the key grated in the heavy lock.

"Even if this don't work," came the voice from behind the muffler, "it's a good trick. You'll have to wear the sheriff's fur coat and cap and his gun. Don't stand there gaping. Meet Chalk at the old cabin on Wild Creek."

"Shep!" gasped Brad. "Shep, what's the——"

"Pronto! Quick, Brad! Never mind the questions. Here's a letter that'll tell it all. Read it when you get to the cabin on Wild Creek. Then burn it. Come on."

Ten minutes later Brad Rutledge was riding through the white winter night. In his pocket was the letter Shep had given him. It was good to be free once more. But what had happened? Shep had promised that he'd go out of jail under a posted bond that would be raised on the ranch down on the Missouri River. Now here he was with a carbine and a six-gun, and Shep's parting words in his ear.

"Hide out with Chalk, Brad, till I send you word. You might have to do some shooting. I hope not. Chalk knows what to do. Good luck, son. So long, till we meet."

Shep, in a corner of the barroom, was dozing over a half-emptied bottle of whisky when the sheriff and a deputy came in. The sheriff had been released by the deputy who had come on duty. The sheriff

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walked over to where Shep was snoring gently. He shook the attorney awake.

"They done taken Brad Rutledge, Shep!" he growled.

Shep came awake with a visible effort. He quirked an eyebrow. His eyes were bleary.

"What's that about Bob Rutledge?" he muttered.

"Not Bob Rutledge! It's Brad! They sprung him about three hours ago! They knocked me on the head, and they got Brad!"

Shep jerked to his feet unsteadily. He took a drink from his bottle, hanging onto the table with his other hand.

"Sheriff," he said drunkenly, "this is no time for practical joking. Let a man sleep. Brad's going out in the morning on a cash bond. Let a man—— All right. Don't shake me."

CHAPTER XII.

HIDING OUT.

AT a small log cabin on Wild Creek, Brad and Chalk hid out. They never skylighted themselves, but were always on the watch. Each of them had powerful field glasses. Now and then they slipped down into the lower bad lands. They watched the ranch that belonged to Brad. Or they would watch the Banning ranch. Occasionally they paid a night visit to the Rutledge place. But nobody ever saw them.

Nobody, that is, except Will Sheppard. He would come after dark and leave before daylight. The three of them would sit all night and talk. And each time that Shep returned to town, he carried back notes based upon the findings of Brad and Chalk.

"Your popularity," said Shep on one of those hidden visits, "is increasing. The strata of life called society has increased the value on your lives. They're offering five thousand apiece for you."

"Dead or alive, Shep?" Brad grinned.

"Dead or alive. Preferably dead. Does it swell your head?"

"I'll take a size ten hat, Shep. More coffee?"

"Coffee royal, Brad."

"How's dad, Shep?"

"He's still the same as ever. I arranged to have both him and the Bannings put under a heavy peace bond. They check their artillery with the sheriff when they come to town. But on the open range they can do as they like. I look for trouble."

"You ain't tellin' me all of it, Shep."

"No," admitted Shep, "I'm not, Brad. You and Chalk do your jobs. I'll take care of mine. Now, where did Ab Adams meet Joe Slocum? And what did they do?"

"Ab met Slocum down near my place, below the drift fence. Like I told yuh, Shep, Chalk and me cut that fence plumb apart. There ain't no more fence left. There's ten thousand head o' BB and Block R cattle on the south side o' the river. They'll winter all right, barrin' another bad blizzard. The feed over there is good. The stout cattle kin paw through the snow to good feed. Them snow plows is workin' all day for the weaker critters. The water holes is all kept open. But who's footin' the damages?"

"You'd be surprised, Brad. Don't let that worry yuh. It's a hard winter. It would take all the cowboys in Montana to drift those cattle back. The Bannings and Bob Rutledge will get a bill for the damages when the chinook cuts away the drifts and the grass comes up again

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in the spring. You leave the thinking to Shep. Ever caught me betting wrong, Chalk? Ever caught me thinking wrong?"

"No, suh!"

"And we've seen a lot together, no?"

"Yes, suh!"

"Good and bad, eh, Chalk?"

"Good an' bad, Mistah Shep."

"And so," said Shep, "follow whatever advice I give you, Brad. I'll do the thinking."

"But listen, Shep. What are they goin' to do to my father on this land business?"

"They have an idea, Brad, that they'll nail him to the cross. The Bannings are closing in on him."

"Can't Ike Markson clear him?"

"Ike Markson? Brad, Ike Markson couldn't clear Bob Rutledge, even if he wanted to. And he don't want to."

"What do you mean, Shep?" asked Brad.

"Ike Markson has some irons in the fire. Some day, in a few months, now, Ike Markson is going to try to pull those irons out of that same fire. He's going to burn those soft, fat, white hands of his when he makes the attempt."

"I wish you'd tell me what it's all about, Shep."

"So that you'd act the fool? Brad, you and Chalk do your chores down here. I'll handle my job. Never mind what happens; stay put. Ride herd on Ab Adams and Joe Slocum. Pay a little attention to what the Bannings and the Block R cowboys are doing. They can't do much until the snow is off the ground and the buffalo grass and bluejoint is above ground. They're snowed in. Frozen in. They're riding out one of the hardest winters Montana ever saw. That broken drift fence saved both their outfits. They'd both have lost thousands of cattle if you boys hadn't cut that fool fence. A spite fence. Your hay is feeding BB and Block R cattle. At forty dollars a ton. I might raise it to fifty."

"What do yuh mean, Shep?" asked Brad.

Shep's left eyebrow lifted. He sipped his black coffee, spiked with whisky.

"You'll find out, Brad, when the chinook wind cuts the snowdrifts and melts the ice on the Missouri. Well, it's time I got going. Daylight in two hours, and it wouldn't do to be caught here."

"But it's snowin' hard, Shep," protested Brad.

"Brad," said Will Sheppard, "I always come when it's snowing. Snow has a habit of blotting out tracks—even as the night serves as a cloak of my comings and goings." He chuckled softly as he put on his fur coat and chaps and high overshoes.

Always Shep came and went during a storm. Not even Chalk or Brad knew where he was staying, where he ate and found shelter when he quit their camp. Shep had smiled when Brad asked.

"Ask me no questions, Brad, and you'll be told no lies."

ON Christmas Day, Chalk and Brad had beans and beef and biscuits, and a pudding known as a "son of a gun in the sack." Chalk made the pudding. The snow was banked high around the little log cabin and the barn. Shep had fetched down some strings for Chalk's battered banjo. He also brought along a jug for Chalk, and some canned stuff that unfortunately froze. The storm was one of thos blanket snows without wind. The attorney, a little frost-bitten, got to the hidden camp an hour after dark.

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"How'd you ever find your way here?" asked Brad as he rubbed snow on Shep's hands and feet to take the frost out.

Shep reached for his toddy and smiled.

"It so happens, Brad, that the big roan horse I ride on every trip was foaled here. I simply give him his head and he brings me here. I'm pensioning him in the spring."

"Shep," asked Brad, "ain't this an old outlaw camp?"

"It was once a hide-out for some of the boys. The place belonged to a horse thief. He had a few mares, and raised horses. But his real job was to furnish certain men with horses, grub, cartridges, guns, or whatever they needed. His grave is out back of the cabin. It's the safest place to hide that a man could find."

"It's been safe for us, Shep. Nobody's bothered us."

"No. Nor they won't, Brad. You and Chalk are set for the winter. Nobody will come here." He smiled faintly as he sipped his toddy.

"They might trail us here, Shep."

Shep looked at Chalk. The black giant grinned and strummed his guitar.

"Nobody's trailing you here, Brad," replied Shep. "They'd stop a bullet if they tried. Now don't get curious. Just listen to what Chalk tells you is the way to ride down here. See those initials carved on that door? Know who cut 'em? No? Dates and initials. Dates when all the law officers in the country were trying to track down a few notorious outlaws. Those outlaws wintered here some years ago. Four of 'em. As you know, there is only one way in here, one way out. They always kept a man on guard there where the trail drops down between the rock walls of the box canyon.

"Brad, there's a man on guard there now. There's always a man on guard there. Your sign going in and out is lost when you cross that rock ledge. And even if anybody tried to find you, there would be a man to stop him. And not far from where the trail drops down is a camp where the smoke never shows. And there are a few men there who would, and could, from their vantage point, stand off an army. Now let's try that food, Chalk."

Shep had always been a puzzle to every man. Brad could easily understand how a few men could hold off an entire posse up there at the box canyon. He had mentioned that to Chalk. And Chalk had grinned and nodded. Then, reckoned Brad, Chalk must know about that other camp.

"Any news?" asked Brad when Shep had finished supper.

"Robert comes up in June, Brad. Special session of the grand jury. Tracy and Taylor Banning figure they have him hog tied. If they prove what they expect to prove, your father goes to prison for an indefinite term."

BRAD paced the floor for a long time. Chalk and Shep kept watching him covertly. Now and then the attorney and the Negro exchanged meaning glances. Finally Brad halted in front of Shep, who was pretending to read a book.

"I'm goin', Shep. I'm pullin' out in the mornin'."

"For where, Brad?"

"Home. My dad needs me. He's standin' alone."

"Go home, Brad? When there's a bench warrant out for you? When there's five thousand dollars bounty on your hide? What good could you do? How long would it be before the law blotted you out? Brad, you

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can't go anywhere until I give you the signal. When the time comes, I'll give you your chance. But until I say so, you're stuck here with Chalk. Don't worry, cowboy; when the time comes, you'll have both hands full of trouble. Now let's get out the checkerboard."

The next day Shep was gone. Brad was unwrapping some woolen shirts that the attorney had brought down. The shirts were wrapped in a newspaper. As Brad opened the package, a headline of the month-old paper struck his gaze like a blow across the face. The article read:

ATTORNEY NOW FUGITIVE

Will Sheppard is wanted by the law. Attorney Ike Markson has made astounding accusations which he declares he will prove beyond all shadow of a doubt when Will Sheppard is brought to trial.

Sheppard has vanished. It is believed that he has headed for New York, as he purchased a one-way ticket for that city. The colorful attorney who, during the past years, has been so closely connected with the cattle baron, Bob Rutledge, will be missed around his usual haunts.

Bob Rutledge has refused to give out any statement regarding the charges against his former right-hand man. In fact, he was a bit rough in his treatment of the newspapermen who called upon him for an interview. One reporter has brought suit against the big cattleman for damages as the result of being tossed down the stairs at the hotel. And it would seem more than probable that the luckless and rather battered newspaperman will collect.

Bob Rutledge should have known better. At present he is in a rather unfortunate spot. Despite the sauve assurance of Ike Markson, public opinion is betting that Bob Rutledge will lose out when he is put on trial for fraudulent land grabbing. The Banning brothers are pushing the case hard. And rumor, based upon past history, declares that one man, and one man only, can keep Mr. Rutledge from spending some several years in prison.

Tracy and Taylor Banning make a flat denial of the accusation that they were out to get Will Sheppard and had been behind this move to put the genial Shep behind prison bars.

Abilene Adams, so-called left-hand bower of Bob Rutledge, was as loquacious as the proverbial clam when interviewed. Never at any time a talkative man, Ab's lips were more tightly sealed than ever.

The authorities are still searching for Brad Rutledge and a Negro known only as "Chalk." Since their spectacular escape from jail a few months ago, they have not been seen. It was thought for a time that Brad Rutledge had been taken from the jail and hanged or shot. Many are still of this opinion. But both Joe Slocum and Abilene Adams declare that Will Sheppard was the man who knocked the sheriff on the head and let Brad Rutledge out of jail. The sheriff had no comment to make.

And so the county is waiting tensely for the outcome of this strange case. We have the Bannings—Tracy and Taylor Banning—who declare they intend to put Bob Rutledge in prison for life.

We have the charming and beautiful Gerogia Banning who is somewhere in the East—or is it California?

And we have Joe Slocum, handsome, dashing, a little mysterious, who has made public the announcement that he is to wed the gorgeous Georgia Banning in June, the month of brides.

Somewhere, perhaps, is Brad Rutledge and his faithful Chalk. Or is Brad dead?

At his palatial log ranch house sits big Bob Rutledge, cattle king. Always with him is the tight-lipped Abilene Adams. Also quartered at the Block R Ranch one can find the suave, oily-tongued Ike Markson.

But what has become of Will Sheppard?

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CHINOOK.

A WARM chinook wind, harbinger of spring, came one night. The snow on sod roofs dripped. There is a soft whisper to a chinook wind—a whispered promise to the men and stock that

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have survived a hard winter. Before many hours the ridges would be bare of snow, and the gumbo clay would be a sloppy underfooting. Coulees would run water. The sky would be free of those storm clouds. The sun would hold warmth. A few weeks more and the grass would come up from ground that was no longer frozen. Geese and ducks would wing their way back into the north country. There would be the song of a meadow lark.

Brad, lying in his bunk, heard the whispered promise, heard the drip of water as the crusted snow on the low roof melted. He called to Chalk and Shep.

"She's here!"

"And a month overdue," said Shep. "Better late than never. He lighted the lantern and started dressing.

"What are yuh dressin' for, Shep?" asked Brad.

"That chinook is our release from winter's prison, Brad," said Shep as he took a swig of whisky from the jug he kept by his bunk. "Likewise it's our signal to get busy. The boys at the other camp will be expecting me. If this chinook lasts long enough, every creek will be a torrent, every coulee will be swimming. Brad, you and Chalk stay here until a man brings word for you to meet me at your ranch on the river. Chalk, build a fire and make me some breakfast while I saddle up. Brad, I want you to sign this paper. It's a power of attorney that I'll need before many hours.

"We're going to show the Bannings and Bob Rutledge that we can and will fight for our rights. And we'll put Abilene Adams and Joe Slocum in graves or in the pen before we're finished. Ike Markson will get his little dose of medicine. The Bannings and Bob Rutledge will be willing to call all bets off before I'm done. Now rustle breakfast, Chalk. Coffee and venison steaks, and sour-dough flapjacks."

Shep pulled on his boots and left the cabin. He was as happy as a boy with his first pair of red-topped boots. Chalk and Brad heard him whistling as he went to the barn to saddle his horse.

"Whut yuh reckon he's up to, Mistah Brad?" asked Chalk as he made the fire and put on the coffee-pot and skillet.

"You know as much as I do, Chalk. But I'm trustin' his judgment and honesty. He comes and goes all winter. The law wants him, near as I can make out. He stays most of the time with a bunch of tough renegades he fetched to Montana from Texas. Now and then he sends letters to the sheriff by some roundabout way. I'd give a lot to know his game, but Shep don't like to be asked questions."

"He got a ace in 'at hole, bet on 'at," said Chalk as he mixed the flapjack batter. The alarm clock said midnight. Brad started dressing. The warm wind whispered at the door and windows.

"Ah reckon Mistah Shep's de smahtest man in Montana," mused Chalk aloud.

"He'll have tuh be, Chalk, if he carries out them promises he's made to us." Brad grinned as he reached for the washbasin. He had confidence in Shep—even during the past month, when the attorney had been hitting the jug a lot; even during the nights when Brad sat up with him, feeding him black coffee and rubbing goose grease on his chest.

Shep's cough had grown gradually worse. There was a worried look in his eyes at times. Shep hid a lot behind his whimsical smile. Only a few nights ago, the night that Shep

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had come to their camp on Wild Creek, Brad had heard Shep coughing at the barn. And the next morning he had found spots of frozen blood in the snow. Shep had made an awkward job, covering up the danger sign of his malady. That biting cold was not helping his weak lungs. Brad was thinking of those telltale red spots when Chalk broke the silence.

"Mistah Shep is a sho'-enough fightah."

Brad nodded as he washed the sleep from his eyes.

"Ah'd ruthah go up against 'em Bannings an' Mistah Bob an' Ab Adams, all in a pack, ruthah an' face Mistah Shep when he's gun fightin'. Yuh-all know how come 'at cough he's afflictioned wid? Buckshot. Yes, suh. Buckshot. But when de ol' smoke cleahs away, Mistah Shep done got hisse'f fo' tough gun totahs. Mistah Bob an' me fetched him to wha' we was located. Fetched a doctah. Doctah tell Mistah Shep he ain' got a chance. Mistah Shep jes' smile an' say he reckon he will. An' he sho' did. But he nevah had no truck wid gun fightin' aftah 'at day. He was always plumb agin' gun fightin' frum 'en on till now. An' now he totes 'at same smoke pole he used 'at evenin' down in New Mexico. Let 'em bothah Mistah Shep an' 'ey'll git mo' 'an 'ey made a deal fo'."

"Reckon he's doin' it for me, Chalk?"

"Not knowin', Mistah Brad, kain't say."

THE ridges, spotted with scrub pines, were bald. Cut coulees were filled with running water, cold as the snow and ice that were melting in the shadow of the clay cliffs. The warm wind exposed the carcasses of hundreds of frozen cattle. Across the Canadian line a Scotch sheepman had lost five bands of sheep. Three of his herders had been frozen to death. Hundreds of ponies on the Fort Belknap Reservation had died from lack of hay and exposure to the drifting blizzards. Cattlemen worth a fortune came out of the winter broke. Their hay had been used up. Their cattle had died. And because nearly every cattleman is land poor and running on borrowed money, they faced poverty when the chinook laid bare their losses in the shape of bones and hides that the winter drifts had buried. And so spring came to Montana.

Along the Banning drift fence lay countless carcasses. The barb wire was cut between every panel of that fence.

Taylor and Tracy Banning looked at the broken fence, at the hides and bones of what had once been big native steers.

"Bob Rutledge will pay through the nose before we're done," said Tracy Banning. "That fence cost us real money."

Taylor Banning looked at the pile of bones and shriveled hides. Then he looked at the fence that had been cut.

"Tracy, I've spent a week riding the range with some of the boys. We're short a lot of cattle. In spite of what Joe Slocum claims about the Block R men killing off our stock, I'm willing to bet that a lot of those cattle have come through the winter. True enough, we've found BB cattle that have been shot. But not many. Not enough to begin to cover what cattle are missing. You can do what you wish, but I'm making a ride down to the Brad Rutledge ranch."

"And get a shot in the back?"

"I might, but I'll risk that chance.

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I know that a lot of BB cattle drifted after this fence was cut. If Bob Rutledge, or whoever it was, hadn't cut this fence, I'd have done the job myself."

"You talk like a drunken man," growled Tracy Banning.

"I'm talkin' like a cowman, if you want to listen. You and Joe Slocum thought up the idea of this drift fence. You left it up to Joe to see that all our weak cows were driven to the line camps. You left it up to Joe to see that there was hay enough to feed our poor stuff through the winter. What happened? Half our weak cattle were missed on the round-up. There wasn't enough hay to pull us through even an open winter. And this drift fence piled up our cattle with Bob Rutledge's cattle.

"I tell you, whoever cut this fence knew the cattle business. And I'll bet my interest in the BB outfit that we'll find plenty of BB cattle down on the river. I'm going down there to the Brad Rutledge ranch. You can come along, or you can go on back to the home ranch. I'm going down to see where our cattle are. And I'll get 'em back."

"No need to get hot under the collar, Taylor. I'll go along. And I'll bet my interest in the outfit that all the BB cattle we find down there will be dead. Haven't you the sense to see that they cut this fence to let our cattle drift down into the bad lands, where they could shoot 'em? Joe has been as far as the dead line which that thick-skulled sheriff set. He's counted hundreds of dead BB cattle. The sheriff, for some fool reason, thinks that Brad Rutledge is as innocent as a preacher. He even hints broadly that Chalk didn't kill Crowe."

Taylor Banning smiled faintly. "Coming along, Tracy?"

"Down to the Brad Rutledge ranch?"

"Down to the Brad Rutledge ranch, yes."

"I'll go along. A fool's trip. But I'm not letting you ride down there alone. A day's ride through slush and mud on an empty stomach. Fool's ride."

"I've never tried slush and mud on an empty stomach," replied Taylor Banning. "I take it you meant a day's ride with an empty stomach, through slush and mud. And that last remark. Fool's ride. Truth in that. Fools may ride, and cowards may prefer to stay home. We left Joe Slocum nursing a cold, did we not? It was more than a cold that kept him home, playing dominoes with Georgia."

"The boy's in love, I'll admit."

"We'll discount that. I left a letter lying on my bed. I know that Joe Slocum read that letter, then put it back where he found it."

"What kind of a letter?" asked Tracy Banning.

"Here it is. Read it."

Tracy Banning read aloud:

> "Mr. Taylor Banning: You had better follow the advice I'm giving you in this note. Ride down to the Brad Rutledge ranch. You will find some BB cattle there. Also there are more BB cattle on the south side of the river. I'd advise you to move them back on the north side before the ice breaks up in the river. It will save you money gathering them. Besides, there are lots of hungry loops on the south side that will cut down your calf crop. Bring Tracy Banning and Joe Slocum along if you're afraid. Slocum might even bring his partner Abilene Adams."

"Who sent this, Taylor?"

"I don't know, but I have an idea."

"Young Rutledge. Taylor, this is a trick. Just a trap. You're a fool

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to go down there. Last time you were down there that man Crowe bushwhacked you. You got off lucky. The Rutledge outfit hired Crowe. Then, when they thought he'd squeal, Chalk killed him. And now you're fool enough to go down there. A fool's ride, I say!"

"Then ride on home and stay with Joe Slocum. I'm going down there. And I'm not afraid of being bushwhacked, either."

"When did you get this letter?"

"I found it tied to my saddle horn the morning of the chinook. It was tied to the horn with a buckskin string. Let's have it back. Then ride on back home." Taylor Banning's tone was cold, final.

Tracy Banning folded the unsigned note and handed it back. Then he loosened the carbine in its saddle scabbard.

"If Brad Rutledge wrote that letter, Taylor, why didn't he have enough courage and manhood to sign it?"

"Brad Rutledge didn't write that letter" said Taylor Banning. "Nor did his father. Nor did Ike Markson. The man who wrote that letter is and could be only one man."

"Who do you mean?"

"Will Sheppard."

Taylor Banning rode through the broken drift fence and headed for the Brad Rutledge ranch.

For some minutes Tracy Banning sat his horse, scowling at the horse and rider. Then he followed, letting his big horse pick its own gait.

CHAPTER XIV.

A REUNION.

BRAD RUTLEDGE buckled on his cartridge belt. Then he took his carbine from its pegs on the log wall. Chalk, shooting craps, left hand against the right, looked at him.

"What at yuh-all boun' fo', Mistah Brad?"

"I'm goin' down to my ranch, Chalk. I've been holed up here too long as it is. We've let Shep take all the risks, do all the work. Chalk, we've never let on we knew that the law wanted him since that day we found those shirts of mine wrapped in a newspaper. Shep likes tuh play a lone hand, I know that. But he's buttin' into danger, and I'm not lettin' him go it alone."

"Ah's tryin' tuh come out on a eight. Directly Ah makes mah point, Ah'll be goin'. Adah fum Decatauh! Dawg! Ol' Chalk is made 'at point. Lucky dice. Ol' Chalk rattles his hocks right now. Gonna git me some gun pleasuah. Goin' tuh be thah when 'at fun commence tuh staht. Dawg!"

Chalk did a double shuffle in his bare feet, then pulled on his socks and boots.

"Shep said to wait here," said Brad.

"You go, ol' Chalk goin' tuh be right along."

Brad and Chalk pushed hard for the ranch down on the river. It was mile after mile of sloppy going, heading the long draws, picking a trail of their own, with mud underneath and a blue sky above. Here and there deep drifts leaked streams of water. Creeks were filled with melting ice.

Brad, scowling, grim-lipped, whiskers covering his jaw, looked ten years older. Above his frost-blackened cheek bones his eyes shone sapphire-blue slits.

Chalk hummed a tune as he rode. Now and then he studied Brad with his eyes.

They were into the river country as dusk caught them, with only a few miles to go. They dropped off a ridge and followed a trail through

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the buckbrush and red willows. Chalk rode in the lead.

"Raise 'em high!" called a rasping voice. "High, you two, or we'll blow the—— Gosh, if it ain't ol' Chalk! Ease off yore hardware, Chalk, it's all right. We was waitin' for somebody else. Don't start shootin', yuh big elephant, go easy, there!"

"Who is yuh?" growled Chalk, his gun in his hand as he slid off his horse and crouched low.

"None other than Lou Eckhart," said a man, and stepped out from the brush, a sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his arm.

Chalk's grin was wide, displaying a set of strong, white teeth.

"Dawg! Whe' at yuh come fum, Mistah Lou?"

"Texas. Shep said you'd be down here in a day or two. Is this Bob's young un?"

Brad slid his gun back into its holster. Three more heavily armed men now came out of the brush.

"We're workin' for Shep," volunteered the tall Texan named Lou Eckhart, "guardin' the trails. We're expectin' them BB gun fanners 'most any time. Seen Shep?"

"Ain't he at the ranch?" asked Brad.

"No. He was at the ranch yesterday evenin' when the two Bannings showed up. He pulled out about dark. He ain't come back."

"Are the Bannings at the ranch?" asked Brad.

"Shore thing. And Tracy Banning is madder'n a hornet about them cattle we been feedin'. Taylor ain't sayin' much. It was Tracy that hired a man tuh ride to the BB Ranch for Joe Slocum an' his men. He bribed one o' the sheriff's boys that's been he'pin' us winter the cattle, not knowin' that he's bribin' a Texican that'd give his right eye tuh he'p Will Sheppard. But Shep tells him tuh deliver the message. So we're expectin' a visit from Joe Slocum an' them BB cowboys."

"But what about Shep?" asked Brad.

"Shep done pulled out just afore dark. Never said where he was goin' nor why he was goin'. Him an' Taylor Banning had a powwow all to theirselves, and then Shep hits the trail. That's all I know. Tracy Banning is on the prod an' says how we'll all do life for cattle stealin'. Taylor Banning is smokin' Shep's seegars an' sayin' nothin'. Trouble's goin' tuh pop when Bob Rutledge gits down here."

"My dad's comin' down?"

"Yeah. Him an' Ab Adams an' that Ike Markson feller. An' they better be here to-morrow because that ice is gittin' bad on the river. Another twenty-four hours o' this chinook an' them cattle on the south side will stay there. And it'll cost Bob Rutledge an' the Bannings plenty o' yaller chips tuh cross 'em back after the water gits low in July. Shep an' you is shore goin' tuh make money on that layout on the south side."

"What layout do you mean?" asked Brad.

"The big spread on yonder side. Land that Shep leased. Where us boys has been holdin' an' feedin' the bulk o' the BB an' Block R cattle that drifted south after the drift fence was cut. That lease is in yore name. Shep said to tell yuh when yuh showed up—and if he didn't show up."

"Lemme git this straight," said Brad. "You say we got that land leased over on the south side?"

"Plumb to the Black Barn. We been feedin' them cattle all winter. Every head o' BB an' Block R stuff

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is bein' held till the Bannings an' Bob Rutledge kick through with the cash money. Tracy Banning is talkin' about how he'll git back his cattle afore the ice gits bad. But us boys has orders tuh stop 'em, even if we has tuh use guns. So far, we ain't heard from Bob Rutledge, but Shep figgered he'd be down with his fightin' men. Before he left last evenin', he said he was chargin' Bob twice the price he was chargin' the Bannings for winterin' his cattle on yore range an' on yore hay. Then he saddled up an' pulled out."

"Alone?"

"Plumb alone. He looked ailin', too. And while it warms up daytimes, the nights is crimpy. Shep coughs a lot."

Brad nodded. "Chalk, you stay here. I'm goin' to see what happened to Shep. I'm goin' tuh make it hard on anybody that hurt him. Shep headed for the Block R Ranch, I'm thinkin'."

"Don't go off half-cocked," advised Lou Eckhart. "Better lope on down to the ranch an' ask Taylor Banning. He knows where Shep was headed for an' he won't lie none when he gives yuh the answer. Make plumb sure afore yuh start. An' when yuh change horses an' start out, take Chalk along. Even if yuh don't take him, he'll foller yuh. I know that big rascal from down yonder. I'm ramroddin' this layout down here. Me'n Chalk has been in more than one tight together. Now go on down an' see Taylor Banning. I'll send along one o' the boys. Yuh see, you two is under arrest. Yuh got tuh go under guard."

The man called Lou Eckert pulled back his coat with a flourish. On his shirt was pinned a deputy-sheriff's badge.

IN the log cabin where the man Crowe had been murdered, Brad, unarmed, faced Taylor and Tracy Banning. The holsters of the two Bannings were empty. Two hard-eyed men, both armed, were also in the cabin.

Tracy Banning glared at Brad, a sneer on his tight-lipped mouth. His black eyes were cruel, merciless.

"Think you have us foul, do you, Rutledge?" he snapped. "You killed a man in this cabin. Now you're trying to rob us. Bob Rutledge is behind all this. You're just his monkey that picks the chestnuts out of the fire. Young man, you'll hang if you don't watch out. We're not paying a penny for the cattle that belong to us. That drift fence was cut. I'll prove in court that you and that Chalk cut the fence. I'll prove that you murdered that man Crowe to keep him from talking. You'd better turn my brother and me loose right now. Hear that?"

"I heard it," said Brad, "but I ain't listenin' hard. I got a few words tuh talk over with Taylor Banning, that's all. I'll talk to him alone."

"At the barn?" Taylor Banning's straight mouth almost smiled.

"The barn will do."

Inside the barn, there in the lantern light, Brad faced Taylor Banning. Out in the darkness waited Chalk and the man whom Lou Eckhart had sent along as guard.

"Where did Will Sheppard head for when he left here?" asked Brad bluntly.

"You want the truth, young Rutledge?"

"I ain't takin' a thing but the truth."

"Then you'll get it. He left here last evenin' to hunt down a man named Abilene Adams. He intended to kill him where he found him. I'm

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afraid, however, that Ab Adams beat him to it—Ab Adams or a friend of Ab's that has good cause to hate Will Sheppard. I tried to reason with Sheppard, but he wouldn't listen."

"How do yuh mean?"

"Ab Adams—or a friend of Ab Adams—might be waiting for just such a move. I'm afraid that your good friend Will Sheppard is already dead."

"Then I'll live to kill the man that murdered him," said Brad, his voice husky with emotion.

"You'd need the devil's own luck if you tackled the job. Ab Adams is a born killer. His friend is a fast gun thrower. You'll be riding into death if you leave here."

"I'll chance it," said Brad, leading a fresh horse from its stall. "Shep's my friend."

"Take my advice," said Taylor Banning, "and pull out for a safer climate. How can you make a getaway from here? We're being held here by law officers. The sheriff is due here to-night. You're a fugitive as it is. The odds are stacked against you. The law wants you, dead or alive. Ab Adams or—or his partner will kill you on sight. Saddle that horse and get across the river. Keep going. Here——"

Taylor Banning reached into a manger, pawed in the hay, and brought out a .45 and a calfskin wallet that bulged.

"Here's a gun, young Rutledge. And here's the money I owe you for wintering the BB cattle. Head south. Don't ever come back."

"I don't quite savvy, sir."

"I have every reason to think that Will Sheppard is dead. He left me with a promise to help you if it came to a tight. He left this gun for you. The money is what I owe you. It's enough to give you a fresh start in life in South America or Australia. I am paying off a debt I owe to you."

BRAD shook his head. "Keep the money. You'd better keep the gun, too. Yuh might need that gun. I'll manage tuh git away from here an' git a gun. I'm goin' after Ab Adams an' that friend o' his named Joe Slocum. I'll kill 'em or I'll fetch 'em to town an' see 'em hung.

"Mister, Chalk and I have done some lookin' around and listenin' this last winter. Ab Adams an' Joe Slocum is in cahoots. It was them that killed that pore devil Crowe because they'd hired him tuh kill me an' he winged you by mistake. It's them, not Bob Rutledge, that's been after Shep's scalp. I know that because I know my father better than you do. He's ornery, but he wouldn't hurt Shep. He puts up a tough bluff, but in the end, he'd weaken when it come to harmin' Shep. Shep told me so. Why, dog-gone it, they'd been everything to each other.

"That shyster, Ike Markson, is just a haired-over wart an' he's workin' for Ab Adams an' Joe Slocum. He's workin' tuh build up this feud that will smash the Bannings an' Bob Rutledge. I got proof—letters sent back an' forth between Joe Slocum an' Ike Markson. I got the original letters that was left at a hidin' place they used for a mail box. Shep forged copies an' left 'em at this hidin' place. They never got wise. In Joe Slocum's own handwritin' is the story o' how that Crowe gent died. Now I'm goin' tuh find Shep."

Taylor Banning pocketed his wallet and shoved the .45 in the waistband of his trousers.

"If you don't mind," he said, smiling faintly, "I'll go along."

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Brad shook his head. "Chalk will be with me. I reckon I'll find Shep at the Block R Ranch, dead or alive. I'll do my own fightin'. I'll fight without the help of ary Banning. If I ain't fit tuh speak to yore daughter, then I ain't fit to take yuh along where I'm goin'. I'm leavin' word with the ramrod o' this spread that all the BB cattle an' all the Block R cattle south o' the river is tuh be fetched across an' drifted onto their home range. There'll be a tally kept o' every head.

"My hay an' my range has wintered them cattle, thanks to Shep. If you ain't man enough tuh pay the damages, then I'll let yuh owe it —you an' Tracy Banning. The same goes for Bob Rutledge. When the time comes, I'll ask them as owes to pay off their debts. If yuh don't pay, then yuh ain't fit to call yourselves men. I'm askin' you a question. You kin answer it with a lie if yo're a low-down coward. You kin jedge for yourselves."

"Ask your question, young Rutledge."

"Where is Georgia?"

"She's at the ranch."

Brad stepped into his saddle. "I'm goin' to see her when I kin git around to it. No man's stoppin' me. Don't follow me now, or they'll cut yuh down."

Brad rode into the night. He took a twisted trail that led him down through the bare cottonwoods. When he reached a big tree that had been struck by lightning years before, he pulled up.

"Yuh there, Chalk?"

"Yessuh."

Chalk rode out of the brush. With him rode the guard Lou Eckhart had sent along with them. The guard was unarmed. Chalk's arms were filled with Winchesters.

"Ah done like Ah said Ah'd do. Jes' nacherally cleaned 'im o' guns, Mistah Brad. Heah's youh guns. I got mine."

CHALK and Brad covered Lou Eckhart with their guns. Brad's voice was brittle, as he gave his orders:

"Let the Bannings get their cattle across to-morrow, before the ice breaks up. Move all the Block R stuff across. Chalk an' I are goin' to find Shep. When I git ready, I'll give up to the law. But not till I'm done with what I have tuh do. Got that straight, Eckhart?"

"I got it straight, young feller. Yuh shore turned the tables on me. Law badges don't count with you, seems like."

"Not to-night. Yuh'll find yore guns about half a mile from here, wrapped in a gunny sack. Regardless o' what Shep told yuh, throw in with the Bannings an' move them cattle across. I'll foot the bill for yore wages. And I'll collect from Bob Rutledge an' the Bannings. Now let's go, Chalk. We got to find Shep."

Brad didn't see Chalk grin at Lou Eckhart. Neither did he see the lanky Texan wink. Nor did he hear Lou tell Chalk: "Give Shep this phony badge, with my regards."

The moon was up. The bare trees made twisted shadows across the slippery trail. And although the breath of the chinook wind was coming down from the prairie land, the two riders were none too warm.

"Could o' used up some vittles," mused Chalk aloud, as he followed the hard-riding Brad.

"When we git done workin', we'll git the wrinkles outta our stomachs, Chalk."

"Could nibble on a bottle o' good likkah," Chalk went on.

"Shep'll have a snort for yuh."

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"Once Ah locates me a wahm mess o' blankets, ol' Chalk goin' tuh sleep a week."

"It'll be warm in jail." Brad grinned.

"Nevah had no cravin' fo' jail wahmness." And Chalk hummed a dismal sort of dirge as he followed Brad through the night.

It was an hour or so before daylight when they rode up to the Block R Ranch. A light burned in the cook-house. Another light, hidden by tightly pulled blinds, showed in the big log house where Bob Rutledge lived. They left their horses in the lee of the big barn.

"Mistah Brad, yuh-all lemme handle 'at Ab Adams. Don' go doin' no shootin'."

"Somethin' is happenin' inside the house, Chalk, an' we won't have time tuh pick an' choose. We'll play the cards that's dealt us. Take off yore chaps an' spurs. No noise. I'm bettin' that Shep's in there an' that he's in a tight."

Through the shadows they made their way to the house. Brad had a key that fitted the back door, and they went in that way.

From the front part of the house came the sound of voices—voices thick with whisky, raised in uncontrolled anger.

"I would have taken you and the kid back, Sheppard, but you throwed in with the Bannings. I don't like traitors, Shep. There's only one kind of medicine that does 'em good. It's called lead poison. Yo're gittin' that dose. I'll give you an even break when it's time to take that medicine."

"I'm ready for it, Robert, any time. But I'd like to do my gun fighting with our friend Abilene, not you."

"Yuh quit me, Shep, like a yellow coyote. I'll take care o' my own cards. Ike, give him a drink. He needs it."

"I'd rather choke for the lack of it, Robert, than to touch my tongue to whisky that Ike Markson has poured out. Trot out Ab Adams, and I'll play Dixie on his briskit with a gun that never shot any man in the back. I'll put enough lead in him that'll sink a ship. I came here to kill him. Trot him out. Dig him out of his coyote hole. Give me back my gun, and I'll show you how a man can stand on his feet and——"

Shep's voice broke into a racking cough. Brad and Chalk, crouched in the hallway, heard it. They heard Ike Markson laugh—then the thud of a hard fist—a whining groan—the thump of a body on the floor. Then came Shep's voice, a husky, broken whisper:

"Thank you, Robert."

And Brad walked into the room, his gun in his hand, his blue-gray eyes ablaze. Chalk stalked behind him.

They saw Shep sitting in the chair he always chose when he came to the ranch. They saw big Bob Rutledge, in a heavy flannel undershirt and blanket-lined overalls, suspenders hanging, fists clenched, legs wide apart, standing over the whimpering Ike Markson.

Bob Rutledge hadn't heard them come in. He was glaring at the whining shyster. Shep was wiping blood from his mouth.

"No man," said Bob Rutledge hoarsely, glaring down at Markson, "kin laugh at Shep and not pay. Git out of here, Markson. Go back where yuh belong. No man kin laugh at Shep when he's——"

Bob Rutledge whirled as Chalk, with an ugly chuckle, pushed past Brad.

Shep reached for the bottle on the

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table. Now Bob Rutledge faced Brad, who stood there, white-lipped, a gun in his hand.

Chalk had stopped in his tracks, a queer look on his face. Shep's voice broke the tense silence.

"Just a little family reunion, Robert. Kick the coyote Markson into the bathroom where he belongs, and we'll talk turkey."

For a long moment that seemed eternity, Bob Rutledge stood there, looking at Brad. Brad's right hand shoved his gun back into its holster. He held his gun hand toward his father.

"Why, you—you—Brad! *Yuh come home!*"

"I come home, dad."

No man had ever seen tears in the eyes of big Bob Rutledge. Ike Markson didn't get the chance to see those tears because Chalk had picked him up bodily and thrown him outside. Only Chalk and Shep saw Bob Rutledge take his son into his arms. Only Chalk and Shep heard the terrible, racking sobs that came from the big man's throat. Brad couldn't hear because he was crushed in the bearlike embrace of the man who was his father.

CHAPTER XV.

COMMON CAUSE.

THREE men rode through the night. The fourth man lay in Bob Rutledge's bed, a bottle of whisky within reach, a six-gun under his pillow. Will Sheppard was too ill to fork a hard-gaited horse on a long ride.

"I'll be goin' over the big divide one o' these days," said big Bob Rutledge, as he and Brad and Chalk headed for the bad lands and the road to Brad's ranch.

"Shucks, dad, yuh'll outlive that gent called Methuselah."

"Dunno, son. Ab Adams is a fast gun fighter."

"I'll take care o' Ab Adams," said Brad, "and I'll take on Joe Slocum. It's time I took cards in the game."

"Hm-m-m. You've changed a lot, Brad. Looks like the Rutledge blood is croppin' out. Ab Adams is my job. So is Slocum. What's the damages on those Block R cattle, son?"

"Nothin'. The damages is paid."

They went on through the night, Chalk in the lead, then Bob Rutledge, then Brad. Occasionally they rode through a barren patch of moonlight.

"I never done right by yuh, Brad. I—— Well, I reckon Shep's told yuh. Shep's been like a daddy to yuh, Brad—him an' Chalk. Yuh say yuh want to marry Georgia Banning?"

"If she'll have me, dad."

"She'll have yuh, Brad."

"A man don't take a wife like he'd rope a maverick."

"So she said when she talked tuh me one night in town, after I was shot up by her father . I don't know how Taylor Banning feels about it, but I know how I feel, Brad. That girl has the makin's of a fine woman. She had the grit tuh tell me that nothin' could stop her from marryin' you if you'd ask her. Yep. Come into my room an' told me that there was only one man she ever looked twice at and that was you."

"Then why didn't she write me, instead of tellin' Joe Slocum that she was——"

"She told Slocum nothin'. Slocum's a liar. He's worse than a liar. I'm wantin' to see you give him what he has comin', but not with a gun, Brad. Use yore hands on him."

"I'd like the chance," said Brad.

They rode on down through the bad lands toward Brad's ranch. For

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the first time in his life Brad Rutledge knew the man who was his father. He saw now that, beneath the coldness, the hardness, the crust of toughness, Bob Rutledge understood softer, finer things. He had seen Bob Rutledge defend Shep when a man had laughed at Shep. He had heard his father tell how he had talked to the daughter of Taylor Banning. He knew that Bob Rutledge was something else than the ruthless man he pretended to be. And he knew that Bob Rutledge was a man of tremendous courage. He also knew that Taylor Banning had that same courage, though it was of finer stuff. Bob Rutledge was like a heavy, slashing saber. Taylor Banning was more of the rapier type, tempered, keen-edged, thrusting.

The trail widened into a rutted road. Brad and his father rode side by side. Sometimes their stirrups touched.

Up ahead, there in the faint white light of the moon, rode the giant Negro, Chalk. And from the shadows and spots of moonlight ahead there came the sound of shod hoofs as Chalk's horse carried him on—on to danger, perhaps death. The slosh of hoofs, the faint creak of saddle leather, the jingle of spurs were accompaniments to Chalk's voice, singing softly as he rode to face whatever fate held waiting:

"Ah got a mule to ride,
Ah got a mule to ride——

HONEYCOMBED ice. The surface was slush under the hoofs of the steers. Loads of dirt and old hay had been scattered across the river. A stream of gaunt-flanked cattle. Cowboys slapping along the drags with quirts. This was what Brad and Bob Rutledge and Chalk saw at sunrise.

When Lou Eckhart stopped them, Chalk grinned widely, and asked:

"Wha' at is yo' badge?"

"In my pocket, Chalk. Howdy, Bob. Glad yuh come. We're short-handed across yonder. That ice is goin' to bust up before long. Got every man workin' hard."

"The Bannings out there, Lou?"

"Both of 'em makin' hands, Bob. Ab Adams an' his crew. Joe Slocum with his."

"We'll help move the cattle," said Brad. "Let's git goin'."

Hour after hour every man worked on—Banning men, Rutledge men—bringing across that gaunt herd to fresh pasture on the north side of the river.

Bob Rutledge and Brad met the Bannings.

"When the cattle are crossed," said Bob Rutledge to Taylor Banning, "we'll have 'er out, fair an' square."

Later, as Brad was tailing up a fallen steer that had slipped down on the ice, Joe Slocum rode up.

"When these cattle is crossed, Slocum, I'm knockin' yore horns off an' leadin' yuh to jail. Try a gun play of any kind, an' I'll kill yuh."

Chalk rimmed back into the hills where Ab Adams was working. Ab reached for his gun, but Chalk beat him to the draw.

"If yuh wa'nt the best cowhand Ah evah seen, Ah'd kill yuh now, Ab. Gimme yo' guns an' keep wo'kin' on 'em cattle. Try yo' best tuh live out yo' last day on 'is heah ea'th lak a cowboy lives. Yuh done seen yo' last sunrise. Gimme 'em guns."

Never was a herd crossed as was that herd, by men who hated one another and were on the alert for a gun move; enemies working in a common cause. They were crossing a herd of cattle over ice that was

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getting honeycombed, rubbery. Water halfway to a horse's hocks lay on the ice. Death lurked in every creak of the melting ice that was their road.

No breed of men on earth but cowboys would have done what these men were doing now—postponing enmities, risking their lives to save cattle that, if left on the south side of the river, would be starved in a month. The feed over there was gone. The ground was bald of grass.

So they toiled, those men who hated one another, toiled all day without food or rest, changing horses when a horse got too leg-weary to work.

The thinning ribbon of the drags kept moving over the slush ice, urged by the slap of quirts, the shouts of the cowboys who hazed them across. A lowering sun shone in a sky as blue as the Montana sapphire. Now and then came a snatch of a song:

"Git along little dogies——"

There was a grayness in the bottom land, with the sunset touching the ragged ridges, and a tinge of red in the sky, when it came—came with a sickening, crashing sound that drove the blood from the faces of those danger-hardened men. Like the roar of an earthquake, followed by the crash of thunder, the ice in the middle of the river buckled.

THE figures of men could be seen out there in the dimming light, fighting for their lives in that mêlée of tossing horns. Cattle and horses and men were trapped in that icy maw, while the breaking ice crashed around them, piling up in a jagged wall. Riders, burdened by chaps and overcoats, quit their horses and tried to climb out on the crumbling ice. Horses, in their terrific fear, pawed behind the men. Cattle rode one another, went down, were sucked under the ice by the swift current.

Brad was the first man to race to the rescue. Behind him spurred Tracy Banning and Lou Eckhart.

Caught in that ice-bound trap were Bob Rutledge, Chalk, Ab Adams and three other cowboys. Taylor Banning was headed for the disaster, coming from the south bank.

Brad and Tracy Banning jerked their ropes free. The ice under them might give way any minute.

"Gimme yore rope," called Brad to a cowboy who caught up with him, then git back. Ice can't stand too much weight."

He quit his horse, the two ropes in his hands. Tracy Banning and Lou Eckhart did likewise. What was to be done out there, had best be done on foot.

Water up to their knees, they ran toward the open water, where men and horses and cattle fought for their lives.

Brad fell, scrambled to his feet, as Tracy Banning passed him. Tracy Banning ran to the edge of the open water. He yelled out at the top of his voice as he threw his rope. A man caught it and was dragged up on the ice.

Brad threw his rope to the giant Chalk. Lou Eckhart and Brad yanked him to safety. Chalk took one of Brad's ropes. He was soaked, and a stream of sluggish blood oozed from a cheek that was ripped from forehead to jaw. But he was grinning.

Now Taylor Banning, who had stayed on his horse, gave a sharp cry. The ice had given way, and he and his mount were pitched headlong into the peril of water and

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horns and hoofs. Chalk roped him neatly as he hit the water. One powerful jerk of his giant arms and Taylor Banning was safe on the ice. Just as Tracy Banning and Lou Eckhart dragged Bob Rutledge to safety.

"Ab Adams!" shouted Bob Rutledge. "Where's Ab Adams?"

Every man save the gun-fighting Abilene Adams was accounted for. They were already getting the horses out of the water. Ab's big gray gelding was swung up on the ice, then Taylor Banning's brown horse, and a fighting bay that belonged to a BB cowboy. It was hard work, swift work, work that required skill and speed and accuracy with a rope. The horses had to be grabbed by the bit, tailed broadside, then dragged out by the saddle horn. Brad and Tracy Banning were doing the dragging. The others were fastening the improvised slings. Big Chalk was worth ten men now, with his terrific strength.

"Where's Ab Adams?" repeated Bob Rutledge.

Chalk wiped blood from his eyes with the palm of his big hand.

"Abilene taken up divin', Mistah Bob," he said, and went on working.

Most of the cattle caught on the ice break had already drowned. They shot the remaining steers, then rode on back to the camp fire on the north bank.

Fresh wood was piled on the fire. A keg of whisky was broken open, and the dripping, shivering men drank from tin cups—hot coffee and whisky.

Chalk had tied his face up in a blue bandanna.

"Yuh say Ab drowned, Chalk?" asked Bob Rutledge in a low tone.

"He come at me just afo' 'at ol' ice take a notion tuh bust. His bullet ketches me across mah face as ol' ice tuhns upside down. Ah might 'a' knowed he packed a extra gun. So, as we goes into 'at watah, Ah goes aftah Ab. Ol' Chalk swum 'at wide Mississippi afo' Ah could walk. Ah ducks Mistah Abilene Adams. An' when Ah ducks 'em, 'ey stays ducked. Wha' at Mistah Brad gone?"

MORE than one man there at the camp fire was asking that question. And the only man, besides Bob Rutledge, who knew the answer, was Taylor Banning. And neither of them was saying a word. They ate beef and beans and bread and tried to warm themselves around the fire. Discomfort often means for companionship when it is shared, even by enemies.

The ice was breaking up fast now, out there on the river that was hidden in the darkness. It crashed and roared as it pyramided and crushed. A few days and the river, asleep under its winter ice, would be a tearing, raging thing, foam-flecked, filled with all sorts of débris. They had got the cattle across just in time.

"You sent Joe Slocum to the ranch, Tracy?" asked Taylor Banning.

"Yes. We needed grub. I sent him to bring down the round-up wagons and remuda. It will take two weeks to cut these cattle and get 'em back on the home range. You heard me send Joe to the ranch, not an hour before the ice broke."

"So I did," said Taylor Banning, and across the light of the camp fire his eyes met the eyes of big Bob Rutledge. "Now that I recall it, you told him to fetch the wagons, the remuda, and ammunition."

Tracy Banning's scowl was hidden in the shadows beyond the firelight.

Meanwhile Brad, on a fresh horse,

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pushed hard for the BB Ranch. The going was bad because of the slippery gumbo. The black hours dragged along endlessly. But as he rode, he forgot that he was hungry and sleepy and cold, because he had a job to do. He was going after Joe Slocum.

Up on the long ridges outside the bad lands the going was better. He kept to the high places, dodging the coulees. The moon was full and white, and the chinook wind was like the warm breath of spring. Every knoll, every hill was outlined against the pale sky. And it seemed, there in the stillness, that sounds carried farther—little sounds, night sounds, mingling with the whisper of the wind.

Brad smelled danger, even before he heard it, with the instinct of a man whose days and nights have been spent out in the open where he is always listening, always seeing things that are missed by men who live in houses.

He heard the click of a gun as he dropped into the coulee that he had to cross to reach the ranch. Even as he heard it, he quit his horse, dropping the untied bridle reins. His horse stepped on the reins, stood still. And it was only when a shot ripped across the coulee that the big gelding jumped a little, then stood there.

Brad had seen the twitching of the big gelding's ears as they dropped off the ridge into the coulee. The shot tore past his head as he dived headlong into the brush.

"That you, Slocum?"

"Who's askin'?"

"Brad Rutledge. I'm comin' after yuh. I'm comin', hear me?"

"Come and get it, then."

"I'm givin' yuh warnin', Slocum. You murdered Crowe, and I'll prove it in court if yuh live to git there. Yore pardner, Ab Adams, is dead. Even a coyote will fight if he's trapped. Fight, yuh coward!"

Brad's gun streaked fire. It brought a quick reply. But Brad had slid through the brush to another place. He shot again, and two of Joe Slocum's bullets almost hit him. Then, with four cartridges in his gun, he was on top of Slocum, who had emptied his gun.

Joe Slocum went to his knees as Brad jumped on him. Brad's gun barrel smashed the weapon from Slocum's hand. Then Brad tossed his gun away.

"Now, Slocum, fight!"

The moon made spots of white on the muddy ground—spots of white and blotted shadows. And there, with no one to watch, no one to tell fair from foul, Brad Rutledge and Joe Slocum fought—fought with all the brutal ferocity of two animals.

Slocum, somewhere, had learned the science of boxing. Even from the first blow, the fight was in his favor.

Brad went down under a terrific onslaught. Dropped to his knees, he rolled over just in time to escape the booting that Slocum started. Brad grabbed one of Slocum's legs, jerked it, and as Joe Slocum fell, was on top of him.

Brad's fighting had been learned in cow camps, where science is little known. But he knew how to take punishment. He took it now as they rolled down out of the brush, hitting and struggling. They went down over a ten-foot bank into the icy water that filled the bottom of the coulee.

Even as they dropped into the shallow creek, Brad heard the smothered report of a pistol. Felt the burning bite of Slocum's bullet across his ribs. He smashed Joe

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Slocum's hate-twisted face as they went under the water.

Brad felt no pain, no shock of cold, only hatred for the man he was fighting. He smashed and tore at Slocum, ripping the derringer from his grasp. Slocum broke loose, scrambled up the slippery bank, Brad grabbing at his legs in a desperate, frantic effort to drag him back.

Now Brad was on the slope, facing Joe Slocum. There was a flash of steel in the moonlight. Brad caught the blade in his hand. The whetted edge bit to the bone, but he did not feel its pain. He twisted the knife free, then clenched. Together they rolled back through the mud, into the water. And Brad's hands gripped Joe Slocum's throat in a traplike vise.

BRAD roped the half-drowned Joe Slocum into his saddle. Slocum was shivering and moaning. Brad slapped him across the face.

"Shut up, yuh coyote, or I'll kill yuh like you killed Crowe. I'd 'a killed yuh when I had yuh dead to rights, only I wanted to save yuh for hangin'. I'm keepin' this little derringer I taken off yuh, to remember yuh by. Before I take yuh tuh town, Slocum, we're stoppin' at the BB Ranch to see a lady. I want yuh to tell her what yuh told me about that letter. Then, from there yuh go tuh town."

And so Brad Rutledge, one hand bandaged, blood from his nicked ribs trickling down his bullet-torn shirt, delivered Joe Slocum at the BB Ranch just at sunrise. Both prisoner and captive were soaked, half frozen.

Georgia Banning gave a sharp cry of fright as Brad prodded the staggering Joe Slocum into the house.

"Brad!" she cried out, her face white. "What's happened?"

"Nothin' much. Joe Slocum's goin' tuh tell you what he told me about a letter I wrote you."

"Brad, I never got a letter. I wrote you, but you never answered." She was at his side now, her eyes filled with fear. "Brad, you're hurt! There's blood on you!"

Brad pulled her to him and kissed her.

"I'm not hurt, Georgia."

He put her aside and faced the white-lipped, sodden Joe Slocum.

"Got anything to say, or will I beat it out of yuh?"

"I stole the letters. I lied. Is that enough? I want a drink of whisky. I'm half frozen. I'm sick."

"Pour the yellow coyote a drink," said Brad, "and if there's some hot coffee, I could use about six cupfulls. Then I'm takin' this murderin' thing tuh town. Georgia, if you'll show up in town about supper time, I'll have a preacher at the hotel. Or have yuh backed down on yore promise? I ain't holdin' yuh to it."

"A Banning don't break promises, Brad. And I don't expect a Rutledge to leave a gal waiting at the church. I'll be there in my best bib and tucker. And I'll bring our best man along."

"Bring who?"

"It wouldn't be a wedding without the man who has made it all possible. He's in the spare bedroom now. And he'll want to see you. I'll call a couple of the cowboys to guard Joe."

Two husky cowboys took charge of Joe Slocum as Georgia bandaged Brad's wounds while he sipped black coffee. Then she led him to the spare room.

A man sat in a big armchair, smoking a cigar, a half-emptied glass in his hand. The man was Will

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Sheppard. He was haggard-looking, but he quirked an eyebrow and smiled twistedly.

"Take a chair, Brad, and spill the news. I knew you'd show up here, so I rode over. Miss Banning is a splendid nurse. Splendid. And Taylor Banning's bourbon is excellent. Great chap, Taylor Banning. A gentleman of honor, if ever one lived. Tracy's of the same breed, but harder to reason with. And as for Miss Georgia, I rise to drink to her. No finer, more courageous girl ever lived. I drink to her happiness, Brad, and to yours. May you find that great happiness that comes on moonlight nights in the form of dreams, to the dreamer who is fated to awake always with empty arms. Sit down, son."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRIAL.

BOB RUTLEDGE, poker-faced, grim, sat in his chair in the crowded courtroom. It was the final day of his trial. The law was trying to prove the big cattleman guilty of land stealing. Helping the battery of attorneys who had piled evidence against Bob Rutledge, was Ike Markson.

Defending Bob Rutledge was one man. That man was Will Sheppard. He was faultlessly groomed, barbered, to all appearances sober.

As he addressed the jury, he held in his hand a fifty-foot rawhide reata. Alone, he stood there, matching his brain against the brains of the best legal minds in the State of Montana. He quirked his left eyebrow at Ike Markson. The left corner of his mouth twitched upward as he looked at the several attorneys with their maps and charts and stacks of law books.

On Shep's table was a pitcher that held a colorless liquid that was not water. Beside it was a leather-bound copy of "Huckleberry Finn," autographed, which Shep had been reading at random during the days of the trial.

Bob Rutledge and Brad sat at the table. Shep picked up the reata, made his formal salutation to the judge, then began his final address to the jury.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he started out, "you have been shut up for three days and nights. You have been forced to sit there and listen to talk that is far from entertaining—maps, charts, dry phrases, big words that only legal minds can grasp. It has undoubtedly bored you. I've been bored, myself. That is why, gentlemen, I want you to sit back in your chairs and listen to a story. It is the story of a man of great courage, an empire builder, a pioneer of this great State of Montana. It is the story of Bob Rutledge.

"In my hand is a rawhide reata. It was used to measure off the land he claims. Pass it around, gentlemen, while I spin this yarn of a great adventure."

Chalk, at the back of the courtroom, shifted his weight from one big foot to the other.

The Bannings had seats well forward. Georgia was sitting between her father and uncle. Now and then her two hands gripped theirs. The drop of a pin could have been heard in the courtroom.

Never before had judge or jury or courtroom audience listened to such eloquence. Every human being in that courtroom listened while Will Sheppard talked of feuds and hardships, enmities now cemented into eternal friendship. He spoke of long days in the saddle, long nights of travel from Texas to Montana. He

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bared the life of Bob Rutledge and cited him as the bravest man he had ever known. He brought in Brad—Brad as a small boy being taken from one frontier to the next, cow country, mining camps, mountains where the snow drifted across their blankets, the desert with its sun and thirst. He spoke of death. He mentioned the love of a girl and a man that had cleansed a bitter feud forever. And he gave them the promise of Bob Rutledge to help out those men and women and children who would be coming into the cow country to homestead.

"Gentlemen, the day of the open range is gone. That land which was measured off with that rawhide reata, that free range, must, by the laws of progress, be divided. Men like Bob Rutledge must move on—on to other frontiers, there to make safe the coming of those who plow up the pioneer trails. I ask nothing of you gentlemen but your understanding of this man who is on trial. Were it not for men like Bob Rutledge, frontiers would never be crossed. I have called no witnesses in this case. But there sit two men, Taylor and Tracy Banning, who will gladly, willingly, eagerly come to the defense of a man who, but a few weeks ago, was the most hated enemy they had in the world.

"The daughter of Taylor Banning is now the wife of Brad Rutledge. A feud is mended. The love of a girl and a brave cowboy has done what bullets could not do.

"A few weeks ago you heard of the case of Joe Slocum, who committed suicide. In his written confession he spoke of Abilene Adams. They are both dead. And we shall not speak ill of the dead.

"Lastly, gentlemen of the jury, lastly, your honor, we speak of Will Sheppard who stands here now. This is the last time I shall ever try a case in court. I am an escaped convict. I was once in a feud that had to do with land. I shot my way to prison and later escaped. When I am done with this story, I give myself over to the law. I go back to prison. But before I am finished talking, I ask you, every man, woman, and child in this room to think a bit about the story of Bob Rutledge as I have told it—the story of a pioneer."

SHEP'S voice broke into a racking cough. He sank slowly to the floor, blood staining the white linen handkerchief he pressed to his mouth.

Georgia was the first to reach his side. Then came Brad and Taylor Banning and Bob Rutledge, whose hard eyes were dim with tears. Bob Rutledge picked Shep up in his arms. A doctor pushed through the crowd, but Shep shook his head, motioning him away. Nobody stopped Bob Rutledge as he carried Shep into the rear room which was the judge's chambers. Georgia, Brad, and Tracy Banning followed swiftly after.

Around the judge's bench all was commotion. Finally order was restored. Ike Markson had slipped out a side door. The other attorneys were gathering up their papers and law books.

The judge stared over his horn-rimmed spectacles at the jury. He cleared his throat, preparatory to giving his instructions.

The foreman of the jury rose. He was a large man, a farmer type, with intelligent eyes and a square jaw. He smiled faintly.

"Your honor, the jury has reached a decision. We find Bob Rutledge not guilty."

The courtroom was electrified.

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Then wild yells echoed, reëchoed as the audience cheered the swift verdict.

Chalk and Taylor Banning managed to reach the judge. Taylor Banning shoved a legal-looking document into the judge's hands.

"I'll see you to-night at your house, judge. That's an absolute pardon for Will Sheppard, signed by the governor of New Mexico. Gad, what an orator!"

"Never heard a better one, Mr. Banning, and I've been thirty years on the judge's bench. Glad to see you later this evening. Here's hoping Sheppard won't die." He quit the courtroom, followed by the jurymen.

In the judge's chambers, Will Sheppard swallowed the whisky Bob Rutledge gave him. He quirked an eyebrow at Bob Rutledge and reached for the bottle on the table. The Bannings, Brad, and Georgia eyed him anxiously. Shep grinned faintly.

"It wasn't my lungs." He chuckled. "I had the dentist jerk out a tooth. To start the cavity bleeding, all I had to do was put a small, sharp pebble in my mouth and bite it. The cough comes from practice. Matter of fact, I'm getting well. Have to fake a cough these days. I'll live to hang. That New Mexico penitentiary will——"

"Will never hold Will Sheppard." Georgia laughed, tears streaming down her cheeks. "What kind of friends do you think you've been making, anyhow?"

"You mean——"

"She means," said Taylor Banning, "that we kinda got together and got the governor o' New Mexico tuh savvy a few things. Just a sort of birthday present, Shep."

Chalk had come in. He stood there, a wide grin on his face, the fifty-foot rawhide reata in his big hand.

"Ah taken it offn 'at jury fo'man."

Shep took the reata from Chalk. He handed it to Bob Rutledge, his left eyebrow quirked comically.

"Well, Robert, it didn't hang you, after all. Did it?"

A Complete, Book-length Novel, "SILVER'S STRIKE," by MAX BRAND, Will Appear in Next Week's Issue.

COWBOY STUNT SAVES DEER

A COWBOY, Ted Polette, of Libby, Montana, recently performed a novel stunt by which he saved the life of a buck deer whose horns were hopelessly locked with those of a vanquished rival.

Polette saw the deer, a large buck, slowly and painfully making its way through a forest. Riding closer, he saw that the buck's horns were locked with those of another deer, long since dead, and being dragged along the ground by the buck. Leaping from his saddle to the back of the animal, Polette succeeded in throwing it to the ground. He freed the animal's horns, and it darted away. Near death from starvation, it must have soon died but for his intervention.

It is not infrequent that battles between male deer end in this manner, with the victor doomed to drag the body of the victim until the live buck falls in its tracks, unable to obtain food or water by reason of the cumbersome weight locked to its head.

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BARBED BARRIER

By GUTHRIE BROWN

Author of "Triangle Dot Strays," etc.

"OH, Kerry, daddy's horse fell on him this morning and broke his leg! The doctor has been here and set it, and daddy is a perfect bear with the pain."

Clare Lindsey pushed back the dark hair from her vivid face as she looked up at the tall young man in worn chaps and faded blue shirt. He was a personable and friendly looking young man, Kerry Dodd. It was not hard to discern that he was deeply in love with the girl who stood so close to him on the back step of the big ranch house.

"Honey," he responded, "that's sure tough luck; and I got something to tell you, that'll——"

"Clare!" roared a voice from within the house. "Who you talkin' to?"

The girl's face wore a worried expression in the warm light of the summer afternoon.

"Maybe you'd better go, dear," she whispered. "He's in such an awful humor. It won't do any good for you to see him now."

"Clare!" The roar redoubled. "Is that that worthless Kerry Dodd? Tell him to come in here—if he's not afraid to face a man who's flat on his back in bed."

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Kerry's youthful face set in a hard little smile, but his eyes were gentle as he asked in a low tone: "You s'pose I'd better go in?"

"I guess you might as well," the girl answered with a sigh. "Try to keep your temper, dear."

"I'll do my best," the young man promised.

The two young people entered the bedroom where Bill Lindsey lay, raging like a wounded lion. Lindsey was a big man and a normally healthy man. Being laid up was a severe strain on a disposition none too docile at the best. Kerry Dodd was a heaven-sent victim of his distress.

"What the devil," was his vigorous greeting, "are you hanging around here for? Why aren't you out hustling a job, instead of lally-gaggin' over the country like you had the spondulicks of some pinhead millionaire?"

Clare turned startled eyes upon Kerry. He nodded to her.

"Yes, that's what I came to tell you. Hanson fired me this morning."

"But why?" she asked.

Kerry looked at the man on the bed, his face hard, eyes accusing.

Lindsey laughed savagely. "The young cockerel thinks I had something to do with it! Let him think. The exercise'll do him good."

Clare started to speak, then closed her lips. How mean of her father to make Kerry lose his job! She knew he had done it. Hanson owed Lindsey a good deal of money. He would not dare oppose the wishes of the big and powerful rancher in the matter of a mere cowboy.

But Bill Lindsey had been unfailingly good to his daughter—until Kerry Dodd appeared on their horizon. Loyal and grateful as she was, the girl was bewildered and hurt by her father's outrageous behavior in this one matter. Clare could not guess that it was nothing but plain jealousy. Lindsey wasn't able to face the thought of losing his beloved chum of twenty-two years.

"Get out!" the rancher yelled suddenly at Kerry, as the leg gave him an extra sharp twinge of pain. "Get out of here, and never let me see your sappy face around this place again!"

KERRY wheeled and strode from the room, for the moment blind with anger. Clare ran after him, caught him at the step outside, and turned him around. He scarcely saw her. Then the red haze dropped from in front of his eyes, revealing the misery in her face. Repentantly he swept her into his arms.

"Please, please, be patient!" she begged. "He had planned to start early to-morrow with a herd of cattle. He was going clear across the range, over to Copper Creek. The boys were all ready, pack horses and everything—and then this had to happen to him."

"Well," growled Kerry, though in a somewhat mollified tone, "isn't he grown up enough that he can have his plans knocked out without raising such a yowl about it?"

"It's not that so much, dear," Clare explained, "though he was looking forward to the trip. But he hasn't seen his old friend, Frank Marshall, for a good many years. They'd planned on a hunting trip, after he got over there, and everybody was to have a big time. Besides, Mr. Marshall was depending on getting this three hundred head of steers for fall feeding. And the worst of it is that daddy doesn't want the boys to undertake the drive alone. Benny is always such

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a scatterbrain, and you know Tip and Chuck. They do like to drink when they get a chance."

Kerry nodded understandingly, and Bill Lindsey yelled:

"Clare, hasn't that underdone tramp left the place yet?"

Kerry stiffened, then whirled and stamped back into the house. Lindsey was somewhat startled at his sudden reappearance, and Kerry lost no time using the slight advantage it gave him.

"Bill Lindsey," he said, "I can take that herd of cattle through to Copper Creek for you. Now, you just listen to me once! I'll take them through safe, and deliver them where you say. And after I do, I'll find me a job, a good long way from here. Then Clare and I will be married, and you aren't to raise Cain about it any more, either. My work on the drive won't cost you anything, except to act white from here on."

Kerry paused, somewhat breathless. He guessed he'd made a mess of saying it, but he'd got it all out, anyhow.

Lindsey's face had grown fairly purple, before he got a chance to wedge in a word. He exploded with a hair-raising oath—then stopped suddenly in the middle of a syllable, his mouth open. He looked at Kerry with narrowing eyes, his expression slowly changing. He tried to cover a look of grim satisfaction that grew in his face.

"It's a bargain," he announced, and turned to his wide-eyed daughter. "Clare, you go hunt up the boys and tell them to get ready to start right away. Tell them that Kerry is to have charge of the drive."

The two young people watched him incredulously for a moment and looked at one another. Clare's face broke into a quick smile. She had an utter faith in the ability of Kerry Dodd. She ran out to find the three cowboys who worked regularly for her father.

"Now, you," said Lindsey, and pointed a broad finger, "whadda you know about the country on the other side of the range?"

"Not so very much," Kerry confessed. "But I have a rough idea of it. I can put those cattle through."

Lindsey nodded with such a manifest delight that Kerry realized there was a catch in this agreement somewhere. But that was not stopping him.

"This is the seventh of the month," Lindsey went on. "That three hundred head of steers must be delivered to the Marshall ranch on Copper Creek by the night of the tenth, without fail. If you don't get them there on that date, you leave the country and never see or hear from Clare again. Agreed?"

"Agreed," said the young man in the faded shirt. "And will you play square with us, when I succeed?"

Lindsey's face congested alarmingly. "Are you insinuating that I don't keep my word?"

"Nothing like it," was the retort. "I'm asking you a question. Are you man enough to answer it?" Kerry rested his considerable and well-distributed weight on one foot, hooked his thumbs in his belt, and stared into the face of the rancher.

Bill Lindsey finally choked out, "Agreed," and added, "send the boys in here before you start. I want to talk to them a minute. I'll tell them that you are to take the entire responsibility for the drive."

Again the younger man detected the note of triumph. But if Lindsey's three hands were to obey Kerry's orders, he could not see where he stood a chance for failure.

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KERRY DODD could not complain about the help he received, in any detail. "Tip" Glandon was a first-class camp cook. He and Benny Ladd could pitch or break a camp in record time, while Kerry and "Chuck" Haines bedded down or strung out the cattle. Ample provision had been made for every necessity of the trip. All the cowboys were able men, willing and good-tempered and friendly with Kerry.

By the night of the eighth, the herd had crossed the range; and the party was camped well down the grassy slope on the southern side. A passing rider, who had been interviewed by Tip, said that it was less than thirty miles from here to the Marshall ranch on Copper Creek.

Though he was feeling cheerful, Kerry was on the lookout for trouble. The young man knew perfectly well that Lindsey would never have made his agreement, if he had not been certain of Kerry's failure. So, after supper each night and before breakfast each morning, the leader scouted his camp in a complete circle, on the alert for anything that looked the least bit suspicious.

The morning of the ninth, with two full days to go, he still decided that he would give himself all the leeway possible, and rode three or four miles down the mountain in the first light of dawn, to pick out a trail for the herd.

On a long, brushy mesa, he came up to a barbed-wire fence. It was an unusually well-made fence, with eight strands of wire and the cedar posts set only a rod apart.

Kerry rode eastward along it for some distance. Then, not finding the corner he was seeking, he turned back. He went just as far in the other direction, without finding any corner, or any gate. By this time, he must have covered at least six miles of the line, and the sun was well up. The others would be waiting breakfast for him.

He was about to return to camp, when he caught sight of a horseman coming through the tall brush on the other side of the fence. Kerry rode back to speak to the stranger.

The latter was a big, saturnine-looking individual who wore a six-gun conspicuously and regarded Kerry in a way that could by no stretch be called friendly.

"Hello!" Kerry greeted him. "Could you tell me about where I'd find the end of this fence?"

"I couldn't," was the level response. The stranger leaned on his saddle horn and looked Kerry over deliberately, noting the worn clothing of the cowboy with a slight—a very slight—smile.

Kerry's blood pressure rose at a rapid rate, but he said in a steady voice: "Over in my country, we answer a decent question decently."

"Yeah?" said the other with a lift of the eyebrow. "Afraid to do anything else, most likely."

"It's easy," Kerry retorted, "to pull that line, when you're packing a gun and I'm not."

The mouth of the man across the fence twisted in a sneer. "It'd take more than a .45 to make us even, feller."

"Do they"—Kerry asked sweetly—"always grow them as nice and gentle on this side of the range?"

A puzzled scowl crossed the face of the stranger. Plainly, he was not too quick on the uptake. Then he perceived that Kerry was making fun of him. Dark color came up in his face, and his hard eyes glittered. He said, in a tone that he meant to sound deadly:

"You don't 'pear to know who I ride for, smart guy."

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KERRY looped a leg about his saddle horn, rested his elbow on it and his chin in his hand, and announced pleasantly: "No. And that's only half of it."

The cool contempt of the reply had the effect he'd hoped for, to make the man opposite more angry.

"Think you're a real bright hombre, don't you?" came the question, as the dirty hand fingered the gunstock. "Never heard of Rocky Coswell, I s'pose?"

"Rocky—Rocky——" murmured Kerry with a musing expression, his thoughts racing. "Rocky" Coswell! One of the biggest and most unscrupulous and most feared cattle owners in the whole State. But Coswell's outfit, Kerry had always supposed, was way to the south! Kerry said, rolling a smoke from a limp pouch:

"A man can't be expected to keep track of all the tinhorn squatters that go sneaking around these mountains."

That blew the lid off. The stranger told Kerry in great detail just who Rocky Coswell was, and how many cattle he ran, and how much land he owned, and exactly what happened to fifth-rate blowhards who got in his way.

There was more of this, much more. Kerry listened with a mildly incredulous air that got him many interesting details about Coswell. But he did not learn the one vital thing for which he had been fishing.

"And the end of this fence," concluded the speaker, who had got his good humor back by reviling Kerry, "is where you find it."

With that he laughed loudly at his own wit, and rode away with the shouted admonition:

"And don't try coming through. No trespassers allowed."

Kerry lost no time getting back to camp. He found Lindsey's three cowboys waiting for him. He got down from his horse and stood with the reins looped over his arm, and looked at them. Benny said uneasily:

"Thought you was never going to get back for breakfast."

"Boys," Kerry told them, "there's a fence in front of us. I don't know how far we got to go to get around it. That isn't the worst of it, either. I don't know which is the shortest way to go."

The three shifted a little, avoiding his eyes, and Kerry asked quietly:

"Any of you boys know anything about that fence?"

"Never saw it," responded Benny promptly.

Chuck and Tip each added: "Me neither."

"That isn't what I asked you," said Kerry, watching them from under his hat brim.

They looked at him, looked away, made uncertain movements with their hands and feet. Then Tip burst out:

"I don't care what the Old Man says! Lindsey has always treated me white, but he's giving Kerry a rotten deal."

"Yeah," agreed Chuck, "and it can't make any difference now, anyway."

"Why not?" asked Kerry Dodd, promptly taking that up.

"'Cause we can't possibly finish the drive by to-morrow night, anyhow you fix it," Benny answered.

"How's that?"

They told him quickly, relieved to speak their minds.

"That fence is fifteen miles long, Kerry. One end is slap up against that whopping rim rock we saw from the top of the range. Remember?"

Kerry nodded. From his survey

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of the country the day before, he would guess that the great rim, sweeping in a vast semicircle far to the east, would meet the fence possibly four miles from camp. The other eleven miles of its length would run westward to the impassable Moltech Gorge—at least that far.

Kerry's face whitened a little, as he took in the significance of his predicament.

"It was a low-down trick to play on you, Kerry," said Tip contritely. "But all the Old Man told us was that he had a bet up with you. When we saw how serious you were about getting through, we had a guess that you'd bet more than you could afford. There was more to it, then!" Tip exclaimed, reading Kerry's face.

He told them in a few words, then broke into their indignation:

"Boys, I'm not afraid to cross Coswell's land, if you'll stand by me."

"His land!" snorted Tip. "The old robber doesn't own a pebble on either side of that barbed wire, Kerry. Don't you savvy? There's just that single fence, with the canyon on the west and the rim on the east. He runs several thousand head of stock in there, and don't pay a cent of taxes. Reason—he's the boss of this whole country over here, courts, sheriff and all."

"But how was Lindsey going to ——" Kerry began.

Tip grinned morosely. "Going to take a week for the drive, clear around beyond the Moltech."

"Then the stock doesn't have to be there on the tenth!"

Tip shook his head. "Only because you agreed to get it there on that date."

Grimly, Kerry considered, and stated, "Then I'll cut the fence!"

"No, you won't, old boy. Riders patrol that line all day and most of the night, and a shot will bring plenty of help from the camp they keep up under the rim. You see, Lindsey told me all about this, when I wanted to know why in the deuce he wasn't planning to cross straight over the range. Frank Marshall, over here, has fought Coswell tooth and toenail, but he's in a losing game. There's nothing left for us to do but go clear around."

"And not a gun to our names!" said Kerry, his heart in his boots, thinking of Clare and her confidence in his success.

"We could never shoot our way through that crowd, Kerry," Tip assured him, "if we had twenty guns. It'd take a young army to handle that bunch. I'm sorry, boy——"

"Wait!" commanded Kerry, flinging up his head, his eyes suddenly gleaming with inspiration.

IT was the tenth of the month, late in the afternoon. Out of the timber on the lowest slope of the range, rolled a brown mass, sweaty and dust-plastered. It was moving rapidly, harried and driven and persecuted by four hollow-eyed, haggard-faced men on gaunt horses. The horses coughed in the dust of the hurrying cattle. Eyes bulging, tongues lolling, voices raised in desperate bovine protest, the stock moved at a weary trot toward a long stretch of fence which lay directly across their path. But this was a pole fence. Kerry did not stop to hunt a gate. He and Benny took down a section, and counted the cattle carefully as Tip and Chuck worked them through the gap.

"Three shy," stated Benny, as the last bedraggled tail passed the poles.

Kerry nodded. "I'll have to pay for those," he said.

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Hastily the fence was thrown together again, and the stock bunched and hurried on toward a group of ranch buildings a mile away. As the herd approached the corrals, three men rode out to meet it. Kerry skirted the flank of the stock to meet them. A tall, blond man on a big gray horse was studying him keenly.

The young leader said in a voice that was hoarse with dust and weariness:

"I hate to butt in on you this way, mister, but I got to get these cattle through to the Marshall ranch before night."

"That so?" was the laconic response. "What's the rush?"

"I got to get there," Kerry repeated, and waved his men forward.

"Not so fast," said the big man. "You aren't going through my ranch like this. Why didn't you ride in and ask permission, like a white man?"

"I didn't have time! I've got to go through! Come on, boys!"

"You can't go through here," said the blond man. "You stop right where you are."

Kerry rode close to him, face white, eyes afire.

"Mister, we haven't got any guns, but we're going through! Get it? We haven't come this far to give up——"

"You aren't going through," repeated the rancher stolidly.

"You try and——"

"Because," continued the big man calmly, "you're on the Marshall ranch now."

Kerry's mouth fell blankly open. The man was telling the truth! "Are you—are you Frank Marshall?"

"The very same," was the reply, with a smile that made Kerry want to hug him. "And now," Marshall went on, looking the four over quizzically, "what in the name of Moses have you young hellions been doing, to get this stock and yourselves in such shape?"

The story came out in jerks and choruses and interruptions, even to the specific causes for haste, while the worn-out cattle scattered and thankfully lay down, and the riders moved into the corrals.

Before the narrative had gone very far, Marshall's eyes kindled.

"Are you telling me," he demanded, "that you stalked Coswell's riders all day yesterday, till you——"

"Till we knew exactly the beat they rode," confirmed Kerry.

"And they never come down into that gulch," said Benny.

"Sides too steep," put in Chuck. "So they rode around and crossed over below——"

"But the toughest job," said Tip, "was lifting them big stones out of the bottom of the gulch, so we could drive the cattle under the wire."

"No," objected Benny, "the worst was keeping the cattle strung out and moving down the gulch quiet, not knowing what minute you was going to get plugged in the back."

"We couldn't stop a second, you see," said Kerry, " 'cause we had to put that fence as far as possible behind us before daylight came. We've run a good many pounds off your steers, Mr. Marshall."

"Kerry brought up the drag all the way," Tip contributed, "where the most danger was. The whole thing was his idea, and I can't believe yet that we're through it alive."

"But," said Marshall, "I don't see why that patrol of Coswell's didn't catch up with you by noon to-day, anyway. They'd find the tracks and——"

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Kerry explained: "That gulch, where they cross it, riding the line, has a solid rock bottom. Besides, we found out from watching them yesterday that they're so cocksure of themselves that they aren't very observant. They've probably taken a tumble by this time. If we've gone and got you in bad, Mr. Marshall, we——"

Frank Marshall smiled crookedly. "Don't you worry about me, Kerry Dodd. I'm almost as well suited as if I'd done it myself. You're the first men that ever warped it to old Rocky Coswell. Holy Moses!" Marshall added in an awed tone. "And without a gun among you!"

"Have you got a telephone?" Kerry inquired.

"Well, not right on me, I haven't." Kerry grinned.

Marshall told him: "Go on in the house and tell that girl about it. Wait a minute! We'll have a little talk, before you put in your long-distance call."

HALF an hour later, the operator had the Lindsey ranch on the line, and Kerry heard the voice of Bill Lindsey. The young man thought: "He must have had an extension put into his bedroom." He said into the transmitter:

"I delivered your cattle to Frank Marshall an hour ago."

Kerry heard a gasp from the other end of the line, and said coldly: "Kindly put Clare on the wire."

"B-but here—wait a minute! You say you——"

"Mr. Marshall," Kerry called in a loud voice, "Lindsey thinks I'm lying to him."

Marshall stooped to the transmitter and said: "O. K., Bill. Right sorry about the leg. Write you tonight."

Tip bent down next and said clearly: "Kerry's a better man than you, boss. He came through Coswell's fence, and got here on time. And we lost a day, at that."

Kerry could not see the dazed rancher silently pass the receiver to his starry-eyed daughter. But the next moment the young man heard his name spoken by the one voice in the world.

Five minutes later, Tip remarked critically: "You're running up a thumping toll bill. The minute rate on that line is gosh-awful high, for an impecunious puncher to be——"

"Shut up!" Kerry told him. "What did you say, dear?"

"Not a word!" disclaimed Tip.

"Kerry, daddy says please don't take the job Frank Marshall offered you. Daddy says he wants you for his top hand, and he'll pay you. . . . Yes, he does really mean it! Says he'll be proud to have you for a son. And for you not to be too hard on a grumpy old man that's crazy about his g-girl. Oh, I'm so happy I'm c-crying. Come home quick!"

"Soon's I get some sleep," promised Kerry.

SNAKE DEMAND SMALLER

ACCORDING to J. E. Adams, of Post, Texas, even the snake-trapping industry has suffered from the depression. Last year he caught and sold three hundred and fifty snakes, most of them going to zoos in Texas and the Southwest. The demand for this year has slumped to a hundred snakes only.

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DANGEROUS DOUGH POUNDER

By **JOSEPH F. HOOK**

Author of "Stalked," etc.

TONY DUNN, the new owner of the Lazy L, happened to glance through the window in time to see the cook-shack door open and a bucketful of dishwater go sailing through the air. That, in itself, was a daily occurrence on the part of Pete Prior, the cook. And Tony would not have given it a second thought, had it not been for the fact that Solly Pope, his foreman, was directly in the line of fire. The deluge of dishwater struck him full in the face.

Wiping his face on his sleeve, Solly went into action. He rushed the door, which the cook had promptly slammed when he saw what had happened, and crashed his shoulder against it, only to bounce back like a rubber ball. Cursing, he tried it again. The noise attracted the riders who were busy in the corral, and they came on the run to see what it was all about.

Tony hurried from the ranch house because, although doubled up with mirth, he knew that the door wouldn't stand much more of Solly's

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battering. And, once inside, blood might be spilled when the cook and foreman tangled.

"Hey, go easy, Solly!" Tony called out. "You'll bust that door, shore."

"Bust it?" Solly sputtered, frothing at the mouth with rage. "Well, what you s'pose I'm tryin' to do? Kiss it? And when I do bust in and git a-holt o' that bow-legged dough pounder, I'm goin' to tear him apart! Stand to one side, or somebody's goin' to git hurt!"

"Now, wait a minute, wait a minute," Tony tried to soothe him. "I guess it was jest an accident, Solly. It's a habit of Pete's, to sling water out that way, and he'll hafta cut it out."

"Accidents, me eye!" Solly roared. "Habit, yore foot! That wall-eyed walrus knowed I was there, that's what! And it ain't the fust time he's drowned me in dishwater, but it'll shore be the last! He's sore at me 'cause I told him this mornin' that them flapjacks would make fust-class hoss blankets."

THE cook slid the window back an inch, put his mouth to the opening, and made an insulting noise with his lips.

"You're allus crabbin' 'bout the chuck," he taunted the irate foreman. "Well, how's that for a sample o' soup, you four-flusher? And if you bust that door and come in here, I'll stick a butcher knife in yore ribs and run around you!"

The foreman's hand slid to the gun at his belt, but Tony Dunn was on him like a flash.

"None o' that, Solly!" he warned, taking the gun from him. "I've got trouble enough on my hands, without having to bury anybody. Jest go on back to yore work and I'll have a talk with Pete."

Muttering dire threats against the cook, Solly picked up his five-gallon hat and a rotten potato at the same time. As he started back toward the corral, the cook slid the window back, stuck his head out, and started to jeer. Suddenly the foreman stopped, whirled, and threw.

The potato whistled past the boss's nose and splattered on the cook's face with a dull plop. Then, amid the guffaws from the riders, the foreman walked away, partially satisfied with his revenge.

"From now on, you walloper," he shouted back over his shoulder, "don't throw nothin' solid out with the dishwater. But, jest the same, I'm danged sorry it wasn't a ripe termater."

Tony waited until he could control his mirth, then poked his head through the window. The cook was on the floor in a sitting position, trying to pick pieces of soft potato out of his eyes.

"Now listen, you," Tony said in a hurry, afraid that he would burst out laughing again. "Let this be a lesson to you. And the next time I ketch you throwing out the dishwater, without first making shore nobody's near, I'll fire you."

The young rancher went back to the house and flopped down in a chair, where he gave vent to a fit of laughter he could no longer hold back.

Incidentally, that was the first time in months that Tony Dunn had even so much as smiled. For he was up against a mighty tough proposition, and ruin stared him in the face. Unless a miracle happened, and that quickly, he felt sure the Lazy L was doomed. Debts were piling up, the price of beef was down, and a hard winter was in the offing, which meant hay to buy.

Two years before, in spite of warning from friends, Tony had bought

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the Lazy L outfit, had added more stock to that already on the ranch, and had turned the cattle all out on the range. And, right there and then, he had made an enemy of "Dunk" Dore, a miserable range hog, who owned the Circle Eye and had the idea that that included title to the whole country.

"You'd better watch that bird," a particular friend had advised him. "He's slicker'n a coyote, and won't stop at nothin' to chase you off. And you won't be able to prove a thing against him, neither. Billy Travers, who used to own this outfit, was found dead in the house, shot through the heart. Everybody thinks Dunk Dore did it, 'cause Billy wouldn't let him scare him offn the range, but there wasn't nary a clew to go on. So that let Dunk out. That's one reason why you was able to buy this place cheap from that real estate feller. They're all scared of Dunk."

But Tony Dunn was not made of the stuff that scares easily. He was young and full of pep, afraid of nothing, and eager to fight only when the trouble was shoved on him. He knew, of course, that Dunk Dore had no more right to the range than he had, and he had long since made up his mind to prove that to him. So open warfare became the order of the day, with the sheriff sitting on the side lines and letting them fight it out, realizing that to interfere might mean prolonging the war and, possibly, forcing the other ranchers to take sides.

SO far, Tony had had the worst of it. Some of his men had been shot and wounded from ambush, many of his cattle had been shot and many others rustled. Although he felt certain Dunk Dore was at the bottom of it all, he had merely suspicion to go on, and proof of that nature won't go in a law court. Several times Tony's riders had taken matters into their own hands and had started out to get the range hog, and every time they had been driven back in a hail of lead. Every move made on the Lazy L was watched by spies from the Circle Eye, so that catching Dunk Dore off guard was as difficult as catching a coyote in a mousetrap.

Thus, after two years, Tony was at his wits' end. The only logical thing to do seemed to be to "up stakes and dig out." But the young rancher had no intention of doing that. He had set himself the task of showing Dunk Dore and his gang that he had as much right to the use of the open range as the next man, and he was determined to see it through, even though it meant ruin.

However, it takes money to fight for one's rights. Dead cattle must be replaced, and wages paid to riders who constantly had to guard the stock in the hills. Buying the ranch and the extra stock, plus the unkeep of the same, had plunged Tony into debt to the bank at Yellow Grass, and it kept him busy "scratching gravel" to pay the interest on the notes. But, now, those notes were about to fall due, and where the money was coming from to meet them, Tony did not know.

Solly Pope, the foreman, came into the house after supper and slumped down in a chair. He was still smarting under the cook's insults, and an unpleasant aroma of dishwater clung to his clothes.

"Well, everything's all set for the round-up to-morrer, boss," he announced. "All the boys need do is toss their bed rolls in the spare wagon in the morning, and the trick's done. The cook wagon's

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ready, too, and if that square-headed walloper——"

"Oh, fergit about the cook, Solly," Tony cut in impatiently. "That wasn't intentional on Pete's part. Anyhow, that's neither here nor there. What I want you to do is see that none o' the boys go to town to-night. Everybody to bed early and up early. We gotta git an early start, and we don't wanna have to wait for nobody."

"O. K., boss," Solly said, getting up. "Well, I'll drag my freight and turn in. See you in the mornin'. Good night."

Darkness had fallen by the time Tony prepared for bed. He glanced through the window toward the bunk house and was pleased to note that the hands had taken Solly's order seriously about not going to town. The lamp had been extinguished, and the usual nightly strains of guitar and harmonica were stilled.

ABOUT the time the young boss of the Lazy L was crawling between the blankets, two men were entering the living room of the Circle Eye spread. Dunk Dore merely glanced at them and then kept on dealing the cards. Grouped around the table were half a dozen of his riders, a tough-looking bunch of men, each one willing to do any kind of dirty work for a price.

Dunk Dore was a tall, powerfully built man, with hair as black as a raven's wing, which accentuated the unusual pallor of his face. His eyelids drooped, partly obscuring the pupils, giving him the deceptive appearance of being half asleep. A pile of bills and chips was before him, and a bottle and glass stood at his elbow.

"I'll listen to you boys in a minute," he said to the newcomers, when the cards were dealt. "This hand'll jest about clean out these tinhorns, anyhow."

"Better ditch the cards pronto, Dunk," one of them spoke up. "We've got——"

Dunk sprang from the chair, his eyes pin points of living fire, a hectic flush spreading over his high cheek bones. Both the riders took a step backward when he threw the cards down and reached for his gun. It wasn't healthy to interrupt Dunk Dore.

"Hold yore hosses a minute!" the same rider cried. "It's a little matter about that guy what owns the Lazy L."

The sudden change that came over the tall rancher was startling. The lines of his face softened, and an evil grin twisted the corners of his sensuous mouth. The men around the table put down their cards as he subsided on his chair.

"Well, now, that's diff'rent," he said. "Let's have it, boys. What about this guy Dunn? Anything new?"

"He's all set for the round-up," the rider informed him. "He's got the chunk and bed-roll wagons all fixed up, and he ain't set nobody to watch 'em."

"That's good!" Dunk exclaimed. "Sounds like that peewee rancher's my meat. Well, I'll learn him not to butt in on my range. He's asked for it, and now he'll get it. Saddle up, everybody!"

TWO hours later dim figures detached themselves from the shadow of the corrals and outbuildings on the Lazy L Ranch, and converged on a single point. That point was the two newly fitted wagons. Silently, like ghosts of the night, they moved around them. A match flared, and then followed a

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scampering of feet as the figures dissolved into the darkness.

A moment later came the rapid drumming of running horses and, at the same time, a sheet of flame shot up, enveloping the two wagons. Tony Dunn awakened, and sat up in bed, listening, still half asleep. One wall of the room was covered by a crimson glow. He eyed it a second, then leaped out of bed and ran to the window.

One look was enough. With a cry of dismay, Tony grabbed a gun, ran to the door, and fired into the air. He quickly got into his clothes. Then he raced to the fire. Riders poured out of the bunk house in all stages of dress and undress, and joined him. Pete Prior, the cook came on the run with a bucket of water in each hand. Crowding up close to the fire, one arm held high to shield his face, he heaved first one bucket and then the other, and ran back for more water.

"Hey, stop him, boys!" Tony yelled. "He'll only spread the fire to the buildings! Somebody's soaked the wagons with coal oil! Look at the pools of it burning on the ground! Grab a shoved apiece and throw dirt on it! It's our only chance!"

But the intense heat drove the men back, and they made no headway. Then a five-gallon can of coal oil exploded, scattering the contents far and wide. The flames, now fed from this new source, shot skyward and drove the men still farther back, where they stood helplessly by and watched the outfit go up in smoke.

"No use wastin' time guessin' who started that," the foreman said to Tony. "It's that skunk Dore. I'm goin' to take some o' the boys with me and kill him! And you ain't goin' to stop me, neither. I'm——"

"All right, Solly," Tony agreed, white with anger. "I've stopped you a time or two before, but I'm telling the world I was a fool for doing it. You can go get him, but I'm going with you! I knowed matters would come to a show-down, sooner or later. Slip inta yore clothes, boys, and let's ride!"

Eager to avenge the wrong done to a man who had always treated them white, the Lazy L riders, headed by their boss, were soon galloping past the smoldering remnants of the round-up outfit, headed in the direction of the Circle Eye.

But again they had forgotten Dunk Dore's uncanny cunning, and nearly rode headlong into an ambush in Cache Canyon. Crimson flashes darted at them from both sides and ahead, and echoing reports rolled away into the distant hills as lead splattered against the rocks or sang a death song past their ears.

Tony managed to halt his men in time and convince them that shooting from cover was better than remaining out in the open to be shot down like rats. For fully fifteen minutes, they fired shot for shot, and whooped wildly when a scream occasionally rent the air. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the firing by the enemy ceased, and Tony's riders heard the beat of horses's hoofs.

"They're on the run!" Tony shouted. "Solly, look the boys over and see if anybody's been hit."

"Jest one or two with flesh wounds," Solly shouted back, "but nobody hurt bad. Come on, let's chase 'em!"

"Not on yore life, Solly!" the young rancher yelled. "Dunk'll have one or two of his gang covering his retreat, and we'll jest run right smack into another ambush. Let's go back home and wait till daylight."

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THERE followed a good deal of "beefing" at the order, but common sense finally prevailed, and the men realized that everything was in favor of Dunk and his men and against them. So they made the return trip in ominous silence, each man busy imagining just what he would do to Dunk Dore if he were fortunate enough to run across him. And when they arrived at the Lazy L, Tony turned his horse into the corral and made the riders do likewise. Then he walked to the house.

As if by mutual consent, the men followed him. Tony lighted the lamp and looked them over to make sure none was seriously hurt, then sat down and motioned them to do the same. His face was drawn, livid, and his anger so great that it was hard for him to control his voice.

"Well, boys," he began, "this is one swell mess, but I'm blaming nobody but myself for what's happened. I've been warned aplenty to watch out for Dunk Dore, and I've let him ketch me asleep. I'd oughter've had them wagons guarded. But what's the use of crying over spilled milk? I'm done, and that's all there is to it."

"What d'yer mean done?" Solly demanded.

"I'm busted flat," Tony explained. "My credit's all used up at the Yellow Grass bank, and I couldn't borrow another cent to buy a new round-up outfit with. Y'see, boys, it costs a lotta dough to start a ranch and buy extry cattle, not to mention replacing them that Dunk shot and rustled. I've had to mortgage everything to get money enough to run along on."

"You ain't busted yet, feller," Solly declared. "And you don't need to worry none about borrowin' from no bank." He reached into his pocket and tossed a small roll of bills on the table. "There's a hundred bucks," he said. "It's yores, boss."

The cook stepped up to the table and shoved Solly's small roll to one side with a gesture of contempt.

"A hundred bucks!" He sneered. "Is that all you've saved in the last two years, you big stiff? Why, that ain't more'n enough to pay for a hair cut and a shave and a coupla drinks. Here, Tony, I got two hundred. Take it."

The foreman glared at the cook and half rose from his chair, but before they could get into a fight, the rest of the riders edged up to the table and laid the contents of their pockets on it. One rider slipped his guns from the holsters and laid them beside the money.

"Soak 'em, Tony, the next time you go to Yellow Grass," he offered, looking at them wistfully. "They're all I've got, but you're shore welcome to 'em. They'd oughter bring forty bucks."

A lump rose in the young rancher's throat, and words failed him. He just sat there, staring from the money and guns on the table to the faces of the men who were standing by him in his hour of darkest trouble. It was the kind of loyalty he had neither asked for nor expected, loyalty he had never even dreamed of.

"Well, boys," he finally managed to stammer, "I jest don't know what to say. All I can do is thank you and ask you to take the money back. I told you I was done, busted, but you've made me change my mind. I ain't done. I'm jest starting to fight."

"You gotta buy another outfit, ain't you?" Solly asked, surprised at the request to take the money back.

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"What? With yore hundred bucks?" The cook sneered. "Why, that wouldn't——"

"Aw, go make a hole in the lake!" Solly snarled, turning on him savagely.

"Yes, I've got to buy another outfit," Tony said. "But I'm not going to use a cent of your money till I've tried my luck at the bank again. It ain't 'cause I'm too high-toned to take yore dough, nor nothing like that, but the trouble is that what's on the table ain't enough to buy what was burned up. Another thing, if I take what you boys has got saved up, I won't be able to pay it back. Fact is, I don't know where yore next month's wages is coming from."

"And s'pose the bank turns you down?" Solly asked. "You ain't got no time to lose, y'know."

"I know that, and so does Dunk Dore. That's why he burned them wagons. He knowed it'd delay the round-up. And that means I won't be able to git the cattle outta the hills and pasture 'em on the creek bottoms afore snow flies, as I was figgering on doing. Which also means jest that much more baled hay to buy."

"Better grab that money then," Solly suggested, "and save time."

"Not now, boys. I'll give the bank another whirl, and if that don't work, we'll put our heads together again. Now you'd better hit the hay and git some sleep."

THE riders were all on hand next morning to watch Tony start for Yellow Grass, and to wish him luck. And they were all on hand, with anxious hearts, when he returned that evening.

"Well, what's the good word, boss?" the foreman sang out.

"Oh, I got the loan, all right," Tony answered, but without a trace of enthusiasm in his voice. "The new wagons and the rest of the stuff'll be here to-morrow morning."

The men looked at each other in a puzzled manner. The boss had made the loan, and yet he was not whooping it up. They couldn't figure that out, at all. So they stood around, hoping that he would explain matters to them, while he unsaddled and put his horse away. That done, he turned and faced them soberly.

"I know what you wanna know," he began in a quiet voice. "Well, it's jest this: I told you last night that the bank was holding everything I owned as security for the money I borrowed to start this outfit. Dunk Dore found out about it, and what d'yer s'pose that slick coyote did? He bought that paper from the bank!"

"Well, I'll be——" the cook exploded. "That hombre shore needs a lotta watchin'!"

"You said it, Pete." Tony nodded. "He done got the jump on me now, good and proper. He'll foreclose on that paper when it falls due. And that's why the bank was willing to gimme more credit to-day—it can sell the paper to Dunk at its face value."

"Great grief!" Solly exclaimed heatedly. "I thought you had too much hoss sense to play inta that walloper's hands that a way. Why didn't you refuse the loan?"

"I knew you'd ask that." Tony smiled wistfully. "But, you see, Solly, I didn't know anything about that, at the time. I took the money and then went inta the hardware store to give Gene Brumbaugh the order for them wagons and stuff. It was him told me what Dunk had done. Seems like he was in Yellow Grass, about a week ago, and was

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shooting off his face about what he'd done and what he was going to do to me. Of course, I moseyed back to the banker and asked him if it was true, and he said it was."

"That's ag'in the law!" the cook cried angrily.

"No, it ain't, Pete," Tony assured him, " 'cause I went and saw Lawyer Crammond about it. A bank can sell notes or mortgages, all it likes, and you can't do a thing about it."

"Well, why didn't you make him take the money back?" Solly inquired.

"What would have been the use?" Tony countered. "What diff'rence does it make, seeing as how Dunk's bought up the other paper?"

"That's all right, boss, but we ain't beat yet."

"I'll say we ain't, Solly, but we're shore gitting a fierce pounding. However, the way I got it figured, Dunk Dore's going to git careless and make a mistake, and then we'll nail him. If that ever happens, he'll wish he hadn't bought them notes o' mine."

THE new wagons and supplies came the next day, but it was a week before the Lazy L men had everything assembled. They chafed at the delay, afraid that the snow would catch them in the hills and make their work doubly hard. Nerves were on the ragged edge, and Solly and the cook argued and wrangled about where this and that should be placed in the chuck wagon, almost coming to blows.

Then a rider from the Bar C outfit drifted along, just as they finally got started, and rode alongside Tony for a short distance.

"Been in Yellow Grass lately?" he inquired.

"Not for a week," Tony replied. "Why?"

"Then you ain't heard, eh?"

"Heard what?"

"Why, Dunk Dore's been tellin' everybody he's goin' to plug you on sight. Says you've been tellin' it around that he set fire to yore round-up outfit. Better watch that hombre, Tony."

"I can take care of myself. And what's more, I'd love to ketch that skunk out in the open once."

"Not a chance, Tony. He's too slick for that, and that's why I rode over. I wanted to warn you. He'll either shoot you from ambush or knife you in the back some dark night. Either way, I'll bet you a thin dime he ketches you when you ain't lookin'."

"He'll hafta go some, then," Tony declared. "He's done ketched me flat-footed once, but it won't happen again."

"Well, don't say you wasn't warned," the rider said, and went on his way.

The round-up started, and none of the men had time even to give a thought to Dunk Dore and his threat until the task was completed. There was little joy in Tony's heart when his small herd of cattle was finally herded down into the creek bottom. Dore's gang had made such heavy inroads on it that the young rancher had grave doubts whether there would be enough fat stock for sale to even meet the interest on the money he owed.

"Interest." He laughed bitterly. "A fat chance I'll have even if I can pay the interest. Dore certainly won't renew the paper."

Solly Pope burst into the ranch house that evening, quivering with excitement.

"We've got Dunk Dore!" he announced breathlessly.

"Where did you git the booze, Solly?" Tony smiled.

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"Booze, me eye!" Solly cried. "I ain't pickled. I'm cold sober. I'm tellin' you we got Dunk Dore. That is," he hastily amended, "we soon will have."

"That's more like it, Solly. Now go on with the rest of the story before you choke to death. What's happened?"

"Plenty. An Injun jest rid up and told me that him and his tribe was fed up with Dunk Dore rustlin' their stock and tryin' to chase 'em offn the range. So they done kep' an eye on him. The Injun says he knows who set our outfit on fire, and a lot of other information, besides!"

"Then why don't the Injuns tell the sheriff?"

"I asked him that, and he said the reason was 'cause an Injun's got no show ag'in a white man in a court o' law. They're goin' to tell you and let you take it up."

"And who's the 'they,' Solly?"

"An Injun chief and two of his side kicks'll call on you tomorrer. They sent this other Injun to-day to tell you to stay home. He thought I was the boss."

TONY did not try to conceal his pleasure on hearing the startling news. He felt certain that he was ruined, but he knew now that he would not have to leave the range without being able to get even with Dunk Dore. He remembered the cattleman's threat of death, but had long since given that up as just bluff.

Tony was so excited that he slept little that night, and was up and about long before the cook hammered on the breakfast gong. Then he took his station at the window, watching all morning to see the figures of the three Indian visitors loom up on the horizon.

But it was well along in the afternoon before they put in their appearance. Standing at the window, it seemed hard for Tony to realize that he was about to obtain information that would mean the overthrow of this range bully who had made life miserable for him and many others over a period of years.

"He might've had more sense than monkey with them Injuns's stock," he muttered to himself. "They're shore poison when they start gitting even with a feller."

The redskins dismounted near the corrals, and dropped the lines over their horses's heads. Then they came toward the house with slow and stately step, taking their own sweet time about it. The tallest of the three wore a war bonnet of eagle feathers, the insignia of a chief.

"Well, that jibes with what that Injun told Solly yest'day," Tony mused. "Heap big chief, feathers and all, and his two side kicks. Man, what wouldn't I give for them blankets they're wearing! I wish they git a move on, though, and not keep me sweating blood."

On the three came slowly, swathed from head to foot in their gorgeous blankets, their mocassined feet making no sound in the soft dirt.

And then, just as they arrived opposite the cook shack, the door flew open, and out shot a deluge of dishwater. Before the Indians could duck, it struck them in the face and cascaded off their shoulders in streams. They stopped dead in their tracks and glared at the offending cook, who was standing on the threshold, empty bucket in hand, aghast at the sight of the havoc he had wrought on the chief's eagle feathers and on the dignity of the trio. Once again his habit of easily disposing of the dishwater had got him into trouble.

"Say, gents, I'm sorry!" he cried,

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hurrying toward them. "I didn't know nobody was within a mile o' me when I throwed that water. Lemme git you a towel so's you can wipe it off."

The tall chief waved him back with a haughty gesture, and grunted something that sounded strangely like a curse. Then, wiping their faces on the corners of the soiled blankets, the three men again took up their stately tread toward the house, leaving the cook mouthing apologies.

Tony had witnessed the incident, and his heart had taken a violent tumble. Only when the red men started on again did he breathe easier. Nevertheless, he vowed he would tie a can to the cook's tail as soon as the interview ended.

But in spite of his feelings toward the cook, it was hard for him to keep a straight face. The tallest of the three, he of the eagle feathers particularly, looked rather wet and bedraggled as he ascended the veranda steps, with dishwater dripping from his hair and the end of his nose. Only the gravity of the mission on which they had come prevented the young rancher from laughing outright.

Then, suddenly, the smile left Tony's face, and in its stead appeared an expression of doubt. His eyelids narrowed until they were slits, and his mouth drew into a straight line. Then he took two swift strides from the window to the other side of the table, where he awaited the messengers, hands on hips, feet spread apart.

THE two red men stepped into the room and then stood aside to allow their chief to enter. He lowered his head, in order to keep the eagle feathers from striking the top of the doorway, then stepped inside. There was a suggestive movement of his right hand under the blanket.

Tony's hands slipped forward and down with the speed of light. An ear-splitting explosion followed an instant later. The eagle feathers on the chief's war bonnet shook grotesquely, and an expression of intense surprise overspread his face. His head fell forward on his chest, his knees buckled, and he fell to the floor, dead. A gun dropped from his lifeless hand.

"Hands out from under them blankets, you!" the young rancher shouted. "Throw 'em up, quick!"

The other two lost not a second obeying. And that was the position in which Solly Pope and the rest of the Lazy L riders found them when they came barging into the room, followed by the cook, who held a long, keen-bladed butcher knife in each hand.

Wonderingly, mouths open, the men stared at the dead man on the floor, the other two with their hands held high, and then at their boss, who was standing on the other side of the table, both guns drawn and blue smoke curling upward from the muzzle of one of them.

"Good grief, Tony, you've shot an Injun chief!" Solly gasped. "He was the guy that was goin' to tell you things about Dunk Dore, and these two hombres are the side kicks that other Injun told me was comin' to see you! Say, what's the matter? Have you gone plumb loco, or not?"

"Roll that bird over on his back, Solly," Tony said, "and take a good look at him. He's no more an Indian chief than I am. He's Dunk Dore! And these two hombres that come with him ain't no Indians."

"But——" Solly began.

"But nothing," Tony cut in. "Look at his face; it's all streaked,

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and the same goes for his two side kicks. They were passing the cook shack jest as Pete heaved out the dishwater, and they got it in the face. Then they wiped it off, *and some of the dye came off, too.* Well, I was warned to watch out for Dunk pulling a fast one on me, but I didn't suspect he was as slick as that."

Solly rolled the dead man over, then took a look at the other men's faces.

"Yeah, I can see the streaks, all right," he said. "Well, all that saved you from bein' shot down in cold blood was Pete's dishwater-throwin' habit and yore own quick eye. Them hombres was all set to plug you and then make a run for it. And they'd've got away, too, 'cause us boys was busy in the corrals and nary one had a gun on him."

"Well, that settles Dunk Dore," Tony said, "but it still leaves me in a sweet hole. Somebody'll fall heir to them notes of mine he bought from the bank, and they'll demand the money when they fall due. Oh, well, what's the use of worrying? Search them two buzzards for guns, and then tie 'em up till the sheriff comes."

Pete, the cook, elbowed his way through the group of riders, his face distorted with anger, the two butcher knives held tightly in each hand.

"Wait a minute, boss!" he yelled. "You're overlookin' a bet. Lemme at them two skunks!"

Before any one could prevent him, he was holding the keen edge of one of the knives against the throat of one of Dunk Dore's men.

"Now you come clean," he shouted, "or I'll start playin' 'Turkey in the Straw' and use yore throat for a fiddle! Who killed Billy Travers? Holler quick, or I'll start sawin'!"

The captive's eyes popped with fear, and his face under what was left of the dye turned a pale green. He made several attempts to speak before he was able to force the words out of his mouth.

"I -d-didn't!" he finally cried. "Dunk Dore did, though! He pulled this Injun stunt on him. But it was at night, and Billy was alone on the ranch; and nobody doused Dunk with dishwater. Take that knife away from my throat!"

The cook turned triumphantly to Tony.

"Well, does that mean anything to you, boss?" he smilingly asked.

"To me, Pete?" Tony exclaimed, puzzled. "Why, I don't git you, at all."

"That confession settles yore note business—cancels 'em," Pete explained. "Don't you savvy, now? There was a five-thousand-dollar reward out for the capture of Billy's slayer, dead or alive, and it still holds good, boss! Now do you——"

Suddenly a suspicious look crept into the cook's eyes. He turned this way and that, sniffing the air like a bloodhound trying to pick up the scent of an escaped convict. Then he turned like a flash and charged through the astonished riders toward the door.

"Sufferin' wild cats!" he yelled. "I can smell me puddin' burnin'!"

Pete's nose was not mistaken, and all hands were well aware of that fact when the scorched dessert was set before them at supper that evening. But, this time, no one made a single complaint to the cook. And even the sheriff, who had arrived in time for the meal, ate a generous helping of the burned pudding before he returned to the Yellow Grass jail with his two prisoners.

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THE LOADED STRING

By HARRY R. KELLER

Author of "The Passing Of Long Tom," etc.

RONNY KNOX set the battered water pail down at the edge of Hurricane Creek and squatted on the snow-covered bank. Blue cold bit at his gloved fingers as he swung the short-handled ax in short, vicious strokes. Three inches of flinty ice crashed through, and he dipped the pail into the clear, sweet water beneath. Then he straightened and set his face toward the cabin, two hundred yards up the slope.

Halfway to the cabin he stopped short, gripping the ax in his right hand. He was almost certain he had glimpsed a furtive movement in the pines, off to his right. He waited, tense. The wolves had been growing bold of late. But the movement was not repeated. Perhaps he had been mistaken; the light was very dim. A thin scum of ice had formed across the top of the pail when he moved on.

He set the water on the rickety table just inside the door of the one-room cabin, making a mental note as he did so that he'd soon

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have to buy a new pail. Water had frozen so many times in this one that the flimsy metal bottom and sides were bulged out of all proportion. Another freeze or two and they would break through, or a seam would give way. Of what value would be a leaky water pail?

He lighted the kerosene lamp, filled the coffeepot, and set it on the little stove, in whose oven beaten biscuits were already baking. He lifted the lid of a tin box and took out a slab of bacon. Two thick slices were sizzling in the heavy skillet before a subtle sixth-sense warning drew his eyes to the window. There was a formless blur of movement, and the window was a vacant black square again. It might have been the silent wings of an owl sweeping by. It might have been the quickly withdrawn face of a man. Ronny Knox stepped back from the stove and stood facing the door, waiting.

For a time, there was no sound save the sputter of the frying bacon. Then the latch rattled under the force of a fumbling hand, and a blast of cold air struck Ronny's face as the door swung inward. A man in heavy mackinaw and fur cap stepped across the threshold. He closed the door carefully behind him, and an expansive smile relieved the dark repulsiveness of his heavy features. Ronny reflected, oddly, that his great, square teeth looked like tombstones. Where had he seen teeth like those before?

THE smile faded, and a queer look, almost a look of truculence, crept into the stranger's eyes. His booming voice filled the cabin.

"Well, kid, don't yuh know me?"

Ronny jumped at the sound of that voice. He peered closer.

"Vickroy! Where'd you come from?"

"That's better." Boone Vickroy crawled out of his coat and stamped snow from his feet. He did not offer to shake hands. He sank heavily down onto the bench by the table, and regarded the youth with speculative eyes.

"Been some time since yuh seen me, eh, kid?"

"Five years." Ronny spoke quietly. His blue eyes were clouded with the mist of old memories, memories stirred to life by the presence of this dark man sitting stolidly on the bench beside his table. He sighed, and shook himself together, remembering his responsibilities as a host.

"Make yourself at home, Vic. I'll have supper in a jiffy. Hungry?"

"Hungry as a wolf," the big man admitted. There was indeed a wolfish gleam in his close-set eyes.

Ronny added more bacon to that already sizzling in the skillet. He took up the bread and set a dish of cold boiled potatoes on the table. They ate in silence, save for Vickroy's great gulps as he swallowed the scalding coffee. Supper over, they pushed back from the table, and Vickroy produced a blackened pipe. Rank tobacco fumes rose to the unceiled roof. The silence became a living thing.

Something rustled in a far corner. Vickroy started nervously, and one hairy hand flashed to his hip.

"What's that?"

Ronny smiled. "Rats," he said.

"Are yuh sure?"

"Sure."

The dark man relaxed. He puffed at the pipe slowly, in a meditative silence. Then he said:

"They told me up at Placerville I'd find yuh here. How long yuh been here, kid?"

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Ronny pushed a shock of blond hair back from his steady eyes. "Ever since I got out of stir down at Rawlins. Two years, come April."

Vickroy scowled. "Too long to squat in one place. How come yuh haven't had to lam out? Too slick for John Law?"

Ronny shook his head. "I'm off that stuff, Vic. Haven't pulled a job since I've been out. It isn't too hard to go straight."

The big man's scowl deepened. "I dunno about that." He leaned forward, his wolfish eyes probing into Ronny's clear blue ones. "Fact is, I'm on the lam now. Little job over in the Flathead country last month."

Ronny started. "You the hombre who stuck up the bank in Kalispell?"

"Yeah." Vickroy spat out the word spitefully. "And a fat lot of good it done me. Didn't get a thin dime."

"But the cashier was killed," persisted Ronny quietly.

VICKROY looked at him oddly. "Yeah. Blasted fool! He started the gun play. Hadn't been for that, I'd have got away with it."

Ronny spoke no word. The dark man stirred uneasily. He tried a different tack.

"What are yuh doin' here, then?"

Ronny stretched long arms and smiled contentedly. "Mining. And making a go of it." His rich voice became serious, sincere. "You know, Vic, the mountains will be good to you, if you only give 'em half a chance. I came here without a penny, without a friend in the world. But I got credit in Idaho City, and set myself up here in the mountains. I found gold—not a bonanza, but enough to keep me going. I built this shack on my claim. You must have passed my powder house on the way in—that's where I keep the dynamite. The mine shaft is out back. I work it steadily, and it pays wages." He smiled proudly. "I've been here less than two years, Vic, but I've saved eight hundred dollars already!"

Boone Vickroy looked at him in astonishment. "Eight hundred dollars!" he exploded. "And for two years' work! Why, yuh sap," he continued savagely, "our share out of that one little job down in Bozeman was two grand apiece!"

"I know," Ronny replied. "But this is honest money. I was just a fool kid then—no more than eighteen. I'm through. It's something to be able to walk among honest men, and hold your head as high as any of them. People think right well of me, down to Idaho City." A whimsical look crept into his eyes. "I reckon you'll laugh at this, Vic—think I've gone soft for sure. But I'm engaged to be married. And I'm going to marry the sheriff's daughter! She's—she's great." Ronny's eyes were shining. "Soon as I have a thousand dollars saved, we'll be married. Well—laugh, you old son of a gun!"

But Vickroy wasn't laughing. He sat on the bench, and his eyes were veiled so that Ronny might not see the sultry fires that smoldered in their depths. Once more silence descended like a mantle. And for the second time the silence was broken by that faint rustling in a far corner of the cabin.

Vickroy looked up quickly. The grizzled head of a rodent appeared from a hole in the plank floor, and two little eyes gleamed redly in the lamplight.

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"They're tarnation bold."

"They're hungry," Ronny explained. "They got so bad I couldn't keep anything to eat in the cabin. I couldn't trap 'em, so I did the next best thing. I got tin boxes for all the grub last week, and shut 'em out. They've had little to eat since. Starvation makes any of us bold."

He rose with a yawn, and indicated two bunks, one above the other, on the south wall.

"Any time you want to turn in, Vic, the lower bunk's yours. I s'pose you'll be wanting to get an early start in the morning? A long night's rest will do you good."

The big man rose ponderously.

"Yeah," he agreed absently. "Yeah, I'll be wantin' to get an early start, come mornin'."

Ronny blew out the light, and they undressed in silence.

RONNY was out of his bunk before the false dawn came. Again they ate in silence. When the meal was finished, Vickroy wiped his slack mouth with the back of one hairy paw, and rose. He reached for the heavy mackinaw.

"Better be goin'," he mumbled. He looked at Ronny keenly. "Sure yuh don't want to string along, kid? There's easier money than what yuh're gettin' here."

The lad shook his head. "No, Vic. I'm in earnest about sticking to the straight and narrow. It's the only way for me from now on."

The light in Ronny's eyes was something Vickroy couldn't understand. He struggled into the mackinaw. Ronny was fumbling under the pillow at the head of his bunk. The big man watched him suspiciously, one hand hovering cautiously near his hip. But when the youth straightened and turned, it was only a long buckskin poke that he had drawn from beneath the pillow. He upended it into his palm, and Vickroy saw a shining heap of gold dust and raw nuggets. Ronny selected one of the latter and extended it.

"Here, Vic. You're in the wrong game, I know. But you were always on the square with me; more so, maybe, than any of the rest of the gang. This is for old times' sake. If you get out of this—it's not too late yet to make a new start."

Vickroy's gaze dropped before the steady light of the young man's eyes. He looked curiously at the heavy nugget in his left hand. Out of the tail of his eye he saw Ronny dump the remainder of the gold back into the poke and pull the drawstring taut. Then, without warning, Vickroy struck.

His heavy right fist caught the unsuspecting stripling flush on the chin. Ronny half whirled with the force of the blow and staggered backward. His head crashed into the top bunk. Moaning faintly, he slumped to the floor, a limp heap.

Vickroy wasted no time. He snatched up the poke of gold from the floor where it had fallen and stuffed it hastily into his mackinaw pocket. He jerked a handful of rawhide thongs from a nail on the wall, and trussed up Ronny's hands very swiftly and efficiently behind his back. Next he tied the ankles just as securely. Then he hauled the inert form roughly upright and dragged it over to the heavy bench by the table.

Ronny slumped down like a sack of meal, his shoulders sagging against the wall. With the remaining thongs Vickroy lashed ankles and thighs to the legs of the massive bench in such a manner that it

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would be impossible for his victim to rise. The task completed, he stepped back and viewed his handiwork briefly, with an air of vast satisfaction. Then he strode through the doorway into the crisp morning, like a man who knew exactly what he was about.

Ronny's eyes were open when Vickroy reappeared in the doorway, his hands full of what appeared to be slender sticks of firewood. The youth's head rolled sickly, then his eyes blinked, steadied, and opened wide at what he saw. Vickroy laughed harshly, and Ronny was reminded more forcefully than ever how much his great teeth resembled tombstones. He waited grimly for what the big man had to say.

"Yeah." Vickroy was chuckling. "Yuh guessed right, kid! This here is dynamite. Some of your high-powered, sixty-per-cent dynamite, punk! I reckon yuh'll always be proud yuh bought the best!

"And that ain't all," he went on swiftly. "I ain't leavin' yuh alive to tell how it happened, punk. Engaged to the sheriff's daughter, eh? And wouldn't it put a feather in our little boy's cap to tip off the sheriff as to where he could nail the notorious Boone Vickroy? Think I wasn't wise to your little scheme all along? But I've got one that'll beat it, punk! The rats give me the idee, last night. Ho—what a joke!"

RONNY stared at him, fascinated. Vickroy was knotting the dynamite sticks together with a heavy cord, carelessly, like a bunch of radishes. Into the end of each stick he inserted a blasting cap. Then he dangled the lethal string before the youth's eyes.

"Look 'em over, kid! One stick would be enough to blow yuh to kingdom come! And I'm usin' six! Boone Vickroy does his jobs thorough. That's why he ain't never been caught! There won't be a piece of the cabin left, big enough for a clew. But the slickest part"—he lowered his voice to a crafty pur—"the slickest part, punk, is the alibi. Watch!"

And Ronny did watch while the big man stepped swiftly to the bacon box and, drawing out a greasy rind, rubbed it up and down the upper length of the cord. When the cord was thoroughly impregnated with the scent, he tossed the rind back into the tin box and carefully closed the lid. Then he stepped to the center of the room, and, tiptoeing to add to his great height, tied the loaded string to one of the rough cross poles that ran from eave to eave inside the cabin. The dynamite swung slowly, caps down, six feet above the plank floor. Vickroy grunted with satisfaction, and turned to meet the look of horror in Ronny Knox's eyes.

"Get the idee, punk?" He leered. "Your rats ain't had anything to eat for a week. They're starvin'! How long do yuh think it'll take 'em to get that bacon scent? How long do yuh think it'll take 'em to track it down? And once they start gnawin' at the cord, I reckon yuh know as well as I do what will happen!"

He chuckled throatily, and Ronny had never heard a more sinister sound. In spite of himself, there was a break in his voice as he said slowly, unbelievingly:

"You—you wouldn't do that, Vic!"

"Wouldn't I?" the big man mocked. "Wait and see, baby face! And where will I be when the dynamite falls? Down at the saloon in Idaho City, in the presence of half a dozen creditable witnesses! They

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don't know me down there; I can risk it. They'll never connect me with this little job. Even if they suspect me, what can they prove? It's the perfect alibi, punk!" He tapped his breast boastfully, and chuckled again.

He jerked the door open and reached for the snowshoes he had left outside. Then another idea seemed to strike him. Whirling, he whipped a dirty red bandanna out of his pocket and faced Ronny again.

"Just an afterthought, me lad. Won't do for yuh to be exercisin' your vocal powers too much. Some pilgrim might hear and get curious. Yuh might even scare the rats!"

Moving none too gently, he forced the filthy rag between the stripling's teeth in the form of a gag, knotting it cruelly at the back of his head. Now indeed was the masterpiece complete. Vickroy stepped outdoors and fastened the snowshoes on. Then he stuck his head inside and surveyed his bound victim with maddening, insolent deliberation.

"Idaho City for me," he boasted, "until after the big boom. Then across the pass to Rye Flat, and the Intermountain will take me to Boise. After that—the coast! So long, punk. Hope yuh enjoy yourself!" And with this final taunt the door slammed, and Ronny heard the faint crunch of Vickroy's snowshoes dying out on the crusted snow of the trail.

FOR a long minute the youth sat silent, his numbed brain refusing to grasp the significance of his predicament. This couldn't have happened to him. The dynamite, still swaying slightly on the slender cord, held his eyes with the fascination of a timber rattler's gaze. Then, suddenly, perspiration stood out on his forehead, and he fought at his bonds with the frenzy of desperation. It was no use. The rawhide thongs merely bit deeper into his wrists, his thighs, his ankles. The best he could do was to rock the heavy bench to which he was bound.

He sank back, his shoulders slumped against the wall, exhausted. His breath whistled shrilly past the gag, but in spite of the faint sound he could feel silence, like a deadly gas, creeping, creeping into the cabin. A deathly faintness seized him, and he closed his eyes and clenched his teeth against it. It passed presently, and he opened his eyes again. The head of a pack rat had appeared in the hole at the corner of the cabin.

Ronny watched, spellbound, as the rodent crept warily into view, its little, glittering eyes never leaving his face. Its blunt nose sniffed the air hungrily. The short, furry tail jerked sharply as the hungry creature uttered little eager squeaks. Cautiously, inch by inch, it crept nearer, toward the center of the cabin. Directly under the loaded string it paused, nose pointing skyward. With one wary eye on the motionless man, it reared to its hind feet, one forepaw reaching foolishly toward the elusive scent, six feet above its head.

Something broke the spell that had turned Ronny to stone. Once more he was straining madly at the rawhide thongs, striving to cry out past the gag, rocking the ponderous bench to and fro in the violence of his terror. Frightened, the rat scurried back to its hole.

Ronny's breath was coming in great, sobbing gasps. Sweat made his whole body clammy. He knew that the respite was only temporary. The rat would come back, would

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grow bolder with each succeeding attempt, as it realized that the man could do it no harm. It was only a matter of time, now.

He waited in an agony of suspense. The fire in the little stove, uncontrolled since the going of the outlaw, crackled exultantly. There was no wind now; the room was growing uncomfortably warm. Sweat ran down Ronny's face. He tasted the salt tang of it as it trickled into the corners of his mouth, held open by the suffocating gag. Minutes dragged by like hours. The rat did not reappear.

A curious drip, drip caused Ronny to turn his head a little to the right. Water was running off the table in a threadlike stream. For a moment he was puzzled; then he realized what had happened. Last night's freeze had burst a seam in the battered pail at last. Now that the room was growing warm, the ice was thawing, the leak was showing up. The monotony of the slow drip beat like a hammer at his fevered brain.

OVER across the cabin, a stealthy movement caught his eye. Emboldened by the long silence, the rat had crept from its hole again. Almost simultaneously something stirred in the opposite corner, and Ronny saw a second rat emerge.

The youth struggled faintly. The rats only eyed him warily; they did not retreat. The first one, in fact, advanced a few canny steps. It did not again move toward the center of the room; instead, in a twinkling it had scrambled up the rough logs which formed the side of the cabin, and was racing along the slight foothold under the eaves, its unerring nose leading it to the cross pole that held the alluring scent of bacon. It reached the pole, halted momentarily, then ran nimbly across, to pull up abruptly over the reeking cord.

Ronny felt his scalp prickle. Unable to stand it longer, he burst into a fresh paroxysm of struggling. The rat on the floor dived into its hole. But the one on the pole merely retreated to the wall, and sat hunched, regarding him with audacious eyes. Presently it began creeping forward again cautiously, inch by inch.

The little beast's nose was over the cord again now. With a curious calm Ronny watched the razor-edged teeth sink in, saw one strand give way and ravel down the length of the cord. The dynamite turned with a slow, inexorable motion. Only a matter of seconds now!

Then a wild hope was born in the brain of Ronny Knox. For a moment he pondered the thought, gave it shape in his mind. Water—and the bonds which bit into his shrieking flesh were of rawhide! He shook the sweat out of his eyes with a desperate gesture. The table was almost at right angles to the bench; if he could, by dint of Herculean effort, succeed in turning the bench, he——

Grimly he shook off the inertia that had claimed him, and threw himself into the violent effort. The rat raised its head curiously and retreated a few steps. Once more the unwieldy bench was pitching like a canoe on white water. But this time there was a method in Ronny's madness.

Slowly, slowly, he inched around toward the table, toward the life-giving water. He had not thought he possessed so much stamina, after the exhausting labors of a few minutes before. A strange power filled him, lifted him up, gave the strength of steel to his straining thews.

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He was facing the table squarely now, and very near. He rocked the massive bench forward, dug in with his toes, held the heavy seat balanced on its front legs. Throwing every remaining ounce of his strength into the effort, he strained forward, the tendons of calves and thighs as taut as violin strings.

The bench teetered a moment uncertainly; then it toppled and crashed forward. Ronny ducked his head in time to miss the table, and crashed into the floor, face down. He was half stunned, and blood spurted in a crimson stream from his nose. But he had fallen halfway under the table, and he felt cool water trickling slowly onto his back!

For a moment he lay panting, fighting to regain his breath after his terrific exertion. From the corner of his eye he saw the rat return to the attack upon the cord, saw a third strand give way. The dynamite revolved slowly, deliberately as fate, on the weakened cord. Then Ronny began working his aching arms up his back, every movement a torture, until he felt the trickling stream fall squarely upon his wrists.

With all the force he could summon, he strained his wrists outward, bringing pressure to bear on the rawhide thongs. He felt them soften almost imperceptibly under the dripping water, felt them give ever so slightly.

Grimly, steadily, he dragged at his right hand. It slipped a little. He redoubled his efforts. The hand was slithering out of its bonds faster now. He felt the skin being rasped from wrists and knuckles, felt that the very flesh was being scraped from the bone. But the stakes were too great to care!

With a gasp of sheer relief he realized that his right hand was free. He risked a swift glance at the cross-pole. The dynamite was spinning dizzily, suspended by a single strand.

BOONE VICKROY sat at a table in a corner of Idaho City's Mansion Saloon, engaged in a game of stud poker. For more than an hour he had been playing with these three chance acquaintances, playing for small stakes, with varying luck.

At length one of them rose and pushed back his chair, indicating that for him, at least, the game was over. At almost the same moment a heavy, dull boom, muffled by distance, fell on their ears.

Vickroy sank back in his chair with an almost audible sigh of relief, his wolfish eyes veiled. The man at his right, evidently a stranger in the town, looked up inquiringly and asked:

"What would that be?"

"Tip" Crowder, he who was standing, stared out the window. "Ronny Knox, I reckon, settin' off a shot in his mine."

He turned abruptly to the bar. As if by common consent, the others rose and trailed along. Vickroy drank deeply, with apparent satisfaction. He cashed in his chips unhurriedly and turned casually toward the door.

Once outside, he donned snowshoes again and headed for the pass above and beyond the town. Just before a jutting shoulder of granite cut off the view, he turned for a last look back. His eyes swept over the town huddled in the hollow, picked up his trail beyond, followed it over the fold of the mountains where Ronny Knox's cabin had stood. He could barely discern the site, miles away across the clean air. There was only a scattered black smudge of wreckage, outlined

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sharply on the crisp snow. Boone Vickroy shook a vindictive fist toward the spot.

"Marry the sheriff's daughter, will yuh?" he jeered, and trudged on.

Rye Flat was only a few hours' trek, due west. He kept to the valleys as much as possible, moving steadily. Once or twice he cast a glance back across his shoulder, apprehensively.

The agent at the little station at Rye Flat informed him that the local had just passed through, headed north for Centerville, where the Intermountain Railway terminated. He was politely sorry, but Vickroy would have to wait until the train returned, some three hours thence, on the down trip.

Vickroy accepted the delay with a bad grace, hunching surlily over the glowing stove in the station house. A vague uneasiness was claiming him. He knew that he was perfectly safe, but still——

A feeling of vast relief swept over him when he heard the little engine puffing officiously down the track. He turned up the collar of his mackinaw, slipped a hand into the pocket to reassure himself that the buckskin poke was still safe, and stepped out upon the platform.

The train ground to a wheezing halt, and Vickroy stepped forward briskly. One foot was already on the bottom step of the caboose when he felt a hand laid lightly on his arm, and a calm voice sounded in his ear.

"Vickroy."

THE big man whirled, his right arm lashing out instinctively. There was the glitter of steel, a faint click, and he looked down foolishly at the handcuffs on his wrist. He slowly raised his eyes to meet the level gaze of a man with a square jaw and a gray mustache, a man as stockily built as himself.

"Who the devil are you?" Vickroy snarled. But he knew. He had seen the gleaming nickel star.

"The sheriff of Boise County," said the man with the gray mustache mildly. "You are under arrest, Vickroy—charged with attempted bank robbery, murder, and a few other small things that slip my mind just now. Your gun, please." A capable hand shot out, jerked the automatic from his hip pocket.

"Yuh got nothin' on me," the outlaw began to bluster. And then his jaw sagged, and his eyes popped as if he had seen a ghost. For over the other's shoulder he had caught a glimpse of the sheriff's companion, and it was Ronny Knox—Ronny, bruised and battered and a bit wabbly on his legs, but still very much definitely alive and in the game.

"Yuh—yuh——" Vickroy sputtered. "Why, I thought——"

"Oh, I know what you thought!" Ronny laughed, a little shakily. Then his voice strengthened, rang out exultantly. "I told you the mountains would be good to any one who gave them a chance, Vic. And I was right! Even a freeze that ruins your one and only water pail may prove to be a godsend!"

"But how in blazes——" The miracle was still unexplained to Vickroy.

"How?" Ronny echoed. "Oh, the rats found your baited cord, all right. But I managed to get my right hand free—you needn't know how—and got at my pocketknife. The rest was easy. By the time I had cut myself loose, however, the dynamite was so near to falling that I simply held my breath, dived through the door, and ran for it.

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At that, I hardly got out of range before the shack exploded." Ronny gingerly felt of a spot between his shoulder blades, where a flying bit of wood had got in a punishing lick.

Suddenly Ronny stepped closer, and there was something in his eyes that Vickroy had never seen there before. The big man shifted uncomfortably, waiting for what was to come.

"I let sentiment interfere with duty and honesty once before, Vickroy," Ronny said. "I was even willing to help you make your getaway! What a fool I was! It's no fault of yours that I lived to admit my mistake. There's precious little of good in your breed. Sentiment won't interfere with your going to where you belong now. It won't even interfere with my collecting the two-thousand-dollar reward that's posted for your mangy head, back in Kalispell! That two thousand will build a mighty nice bungalow on my claim, hombre—a home for me and the sheriff's daughter! And, Vic"—Ronny's tone was light again, almost bantering—"when we build that bungalow, we're going to make it rat-proof!"

ADOBE GETS SHELTER

IN Arizona, the national park service is erecting a concrete-and-steel shelter over the famous adobe ruins of Casa Grande. The ruins are believed to have been constructed by prehistoric Indians nearly eight hundred years ago. Although the shelter will not be walled up, the roof, or canopy, will extend over the edges of the ruins far enough to protect them from driving storms.

In Next Week's Issue of

Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine

A COMPLETE, BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

SILVER'S STRIKE

By Max Brand

A dying man wills his ranch and herds to his three worst enemies—foreseeing sweet revenge to be the outcome of his evilly conceived generosity.

THE SHOOTING PARSON

By W. W. Hatfield

A two-year-old poker game, interrupted by gun play, is resumed by Fresno Jack and Salt Lake Ned, for peculiar stakes.

Also Features by

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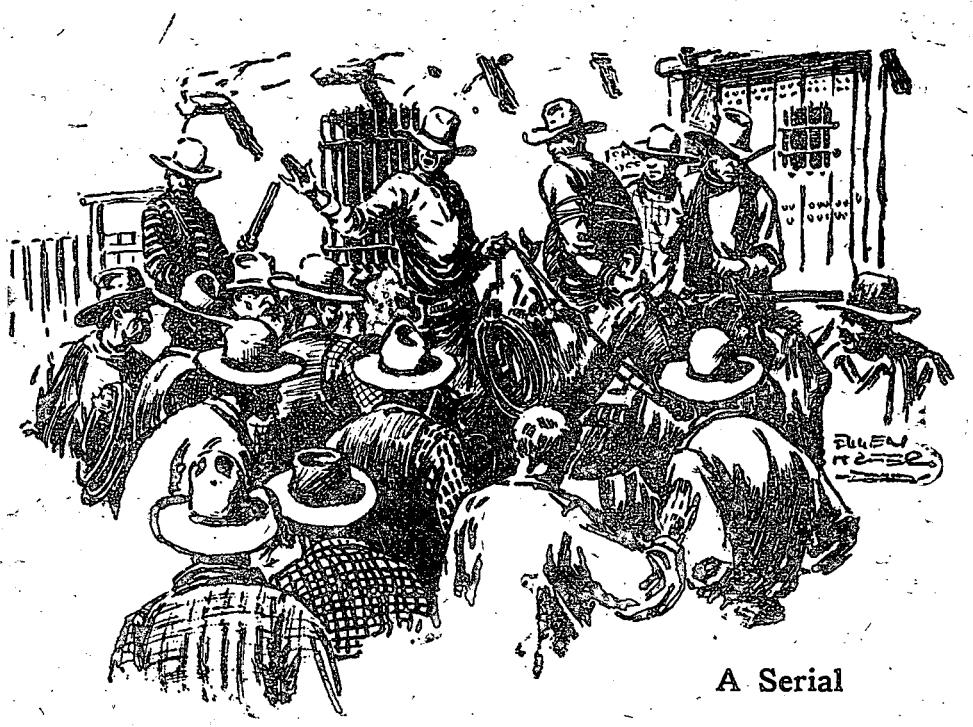

A Serial

GUNMAN'S GOLD

By JOHN FREDERICK

IN a back room of the Best Chance Saloon on the edge of Deerfoot, Doc Halpin and Chad Powell tell Jack Reynolds, who grubstaked them, of their discovery of gold in the Owens Desert. They are overheard by Lee Swain, who follows the trio as they start back in the desert to stake out claims.

From a distance Swain watches the three men as they camp and begin digging a prospect hole. Toward evening, Reynolds rides off with the horses—presumably in search of water—and Swain sneaks up on the other two men and murders them. Then he discovers that there is no gold in the vicinity. He realizes that Halpin and Powell had thought that the vein of their strike might be due to crop out again in this spot, and had just stopped to dig a bit. So he has killed two men in vain!

Swain then rides back to Deerfoot. The sheriff is away, and Swain tells a leading citizen, Doc Pringle, that he discovered two murdered men in the desert. Pringle suspects Reynolds, who has a reputation as a gunman. A posse is sent out after him, and Reynolds wounds three men before he is captured. It is then decided to return him to Deerfoot for lynching there.

Arthur Howison—a wealthy cattleman, who was a friend of Reynolds's father, now dead—enlists the aid of Sam Shannigan, who

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works as a special agent outside the law, to save Jack Reynolds from hanging.

Subsequently there arrives in Deerfoot a very attractive young woman, who says she is the wife of Jack Reynolds and shows pictures of their two children; she has come from their home near Alexandria, Virginia, accompanied by a mulatto servant, Sam. The "mulatto" is actually Shanningan in disguise, and the girl, Mary Tracy, is the daughter of Shannigan's housekeeper.

Playing their parts well, the pair arouse sympathy for Jack Reynolds among the citizens of Deerfoot. And so a delegation is sent from the town to meet the returning posse, which has been making a very slow journey back to Deerfoot, due to the transporting of the wounded. The delegation is to inform the posse of the circumstances and to seek to delay its entry into town with the prisoner until further consideration can be given to the situation.

Against the generally sympathetic attitude of the town, one dissenting voice is raised—that of Lee Swain. Futilely he seeks to expose the fraud by questioning Sam. But Shannigan, by his answers, convinces the Deerfoot citizens that he is just what he pretends to be.

The delegation from town meets the posse three miles out. But Pringle and the wounded men are disgusted with Deerfoot's change of sentiment, and resolve to hang the prisoner at once. They are interrupted by Sheriff Steve Lancing, who is returning to town with three Mexican rustlers. Lancing orders the posse to postpone the hanging of Reynolds until sunrise the next day. Then he goes on to Deerfoot with his captives, while the posse encamps for the night.

Before daylight the next morning, Shannigan prevails upon the sheriff to try to take Reynolds away from the posse and put him in jail. The posse objects to giving up the prisoner, and while the men are arguing with the sheriff, Shannigan frees Reynolds, and the two of them make a get-away. Reynolds then learns that Arthur Howison is back of the efforts of Shannigan and Mary Tracy in his behalf.

CHAPTER XIV.

RETURN OF THE POSSE.

"I NEVER knew what a grand world it is," said Reynolds. "I never guessed, before, how good it is to breathe. Look at 'em yonder, Sam, hunting that false scent as hard as they can run!"

For the entire posse had apparently decided that the prisoner must have fled back up the trail, and now they were spurring their horses at full speed up the ascent. They were in view for only a moment, and then dipped away behind a shoulder of a hill, and were gone. But they were still so near that thin, flying shoes beat back across the air to the two who listened.

"And Howison was behind it all?" muttered Jack Reynolds.

"Behind the whole thing," said Shannigan. "I reckon that nobody would ever 'a' lifted a finger for you, sir, except for him. You would 'a' hanged yesterday in Deerfoot, and you'd be lyin' under a mound of earth this mornin', Mr. Jack!"

"The girl," said Reynolds. "What about her?"

"Mis' Mary—your poor little wife, sir?" asked Shannigan.

Reynolds laughed.

"All right, call her that if you want to. She stopped the mob, I take it?"

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"She stopped 'em dead, sir. She pulled 'em right back and made 'em shy. There is brains in that little lady, Mr. Jack."

"I've got to see her. I've got to see Howison, too," said Reynolds. "I didn't dream that he had the blood in him to do such a thing as this. I still can't understand it! Where is Howison now?"

"Right back there in Deerfoot, sir."

"I'll manage to slip in," declared the big fellow, nodding his fine head.

"That'll be easy," said Shannigan. "You can see them all when you're in jail."

"Jail?"

"Yes, sir."

"What are you talking about, Sam?"

"It needed a good deal of persuading to get the sheriff to take a stand for you, Mr. Jack," said Shannigan. "But finally he come in and agreed to help, if we'd deliver you at the jail, sure enough."

REYNOLDS stared. "Hold on, Sam," said he. "You mean that I'm to go into Deerfoot and give myself up?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not crazy, boy!"

"You need to stand your trial, and be cleared, Mr. Jack."

"Cleared in Deerfoot? They'd simply raise another mob and lynch me, and the second time, they'd go through with it! What possessed anybody to make such a crazy bargain with the sheriff?"

"You wouldn't wanta be hangin', just now, from off of the branch of that tree back there, with your eyes as dead as the eyes of a rabbit, would you, Mr. Jack?"

"You mean that you had to get the sheriff in at any price?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sam," said Reynolds, "I can see that you're an honest fellow and that you want to live up to agreements. But I can't agree with you as far as that."

"Suppose," said Shannigan, "that you ride away now. Ain't folks still goin' to call you a murderer, sir?"

"What if they do—so long as they haven't a rope around my neck!"

"They'll have it there, one day. Nobody can beat the law very long, sir. One time it'll come sneakin' up and catch you while you sleep. Your friends is goin' to be powerful sick, Mister Jack, to think of you hunted around in the hills, like a coyote."

"Let 'em be sick. I've had enough taste of a crowd and mob justice to last me the rest of my life."

"Mr. Jack," said Shannigan, with a sudden change of voice. "You didn't kill Powell and Halpin?"

"No. But who'll believe me when I say no?"

"There's ways of makin' the truth come out," declared Sam Shannigan. "There's plenty of ways of makin' it appear. What happened back there in the Owens Desert, Jack?"

"A long story happened back there," declared Reynolds. "But the point of the yarn is, simply, that I'm not going to jail again."

Shannigan looked carefully over him.

"I don't like to do it, sir," said he. "But if you ain't goin' to come dead willing, you'll have to come dead unwilling, I reckon."

Jack Reynolds snapped his fingers, and laughed.

"Going to have Arthur Howison *order* me into jail, Sam?" he asked.

"No, sir," said Shannigan. "This here is a little agreement that I made all by myself with the sheriff—my word and honor and his word and honor. I'm a tough sort of a man,

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and a bad sort of man in lots of ways, Mr. Jack, but the one thing that I keep is my word, sir. We'd better start back now."

He was sitting the saddle close to Reynolds and now he laid a gentle hand on the arm of the youth.

Fire flashed from Reynolds's eyes.

"Drop that hand, Sam!" he commanded.

And he turned to knock the hand away.

HE suddenly found himself sprawling, face down, across the withers of the black horse. The rifle fell from his hand to the earth.

Then he was allowed to slip to the ground. He was facing a drawn and steady revolver.

"What d'you mean, Sam?" he gasped.

"I mean that you go to jail, Mr. Jack," said Shannigan.

"You thick-witted fool!" cried Reynolds, rubbing himself where that terrible grip had seized on him. "D'you want to undo everything that's been done?"

"If it meant the breakin' of my word, Mr. Jack," said that profound bass voice, with the hushed-organ ring in it, "I'd shoot you like a dog, and leave you here to stay!"

Jack Reynolds stared for an instant into the face of the other. He could not endure for more than a moment that glance which met his, and that convulsed and brutal savagery which was stamped in the other.

Then he looked down, fairly dizzy with what he had seen.

"Sam," he said, "you're not what you seem. What are you, in the name of the devil?"

"Why, sir," said Shannigan, instantly smoothing the hardened scowl from his face, "I'm a friend of yours, Mr. Jack, and I'm tryin' to take you the right way out of a bad place in your life."

Reynolds picked up the rifle and handed it butt first to Shannigan.

"Take that and keep it," he said. "I feel as though lightning had hit me. One thing is sure—I've got to go where you want to take me. But I'll tell you this, Sam—you and I will have to have a long reckoning, if I live to come to it."

Shannigan nodded slowly. "I sort of have the same idea, Mr. Jack," said he. "You've had your own way in the world a pretty long time, and when we have the reckoning, maybe they'll be a sort of a big score between us, one way or another! Get back on your hoss, and ride before me all the way to Deerfoot. And mind you, Mr. Jack, I got an uneasy gun hand, and from this time on, if I shoot, I shoot to kill."

WESTERNERS are not patient people, in some respects, chiefly in their dealings with other men. Patience and nothing but patience will bring a reward to the prospector and the cattleman; knowledge and the capacity for long and patient labor are the requisites that go with his career. But when it comes to his dealings with other men, he is apt to take snap judgment and let the matter go. Friendship is not the same thing, of course. A tried friend lasts forever in that part of the world. But in other human relationships the Westerner makes up his mind on the spur of the moment.

The posse made up its mind about Sheriff Steve Lancing the instant that it saw the prisoner escape.

More than half of them streamed away in the vain pursuit after the fugitive, but Pringle and the rest remained behind. And it was

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from Pringle's hand that the lariat flew that settled around the shoulders of big Lancing and reduced him instantly to helplessness.

As he strove to free his arms, fresh twists of rope showered over him, and he was swathed from head to foot in the rounds of hemp.

He was lying helplessly on the ground as they disarmed him. The debate over him was brief.

It was true that they might hang him on the spot as a rascal who must have taken bribes to set the prisoner free. But it seemed a much safer thing to take him into the town of Deerfoot and there let the whole crowd of the town act as judge and, if necessary, as executioner as well!

So they partially freed him, and got him on the back of a horse. There they lashed him securely once more. The wounded men were put in the litters, and with the scanty remainder of the posse—merely five men in all, exclusive of those helpless with their hurts—the group returned into the town.

They had expected to come with jubilation. They had expected to be met by a rioting populace only that afternoon. Now they found that they were balked of their prey, and it was a bitter, though a true, consolation to take with them in their return some one on whom they could blame their failure.

There was no whooping, no shouting, and the crowd that gathered was not composed of men, women, and children. There were men only, and their tone was stern.

They jammed the street so that progress was more and more slow. At last, exactly by the little jail, they paused. It was not much of a jail, but it was filled, just then, with various malefactors whom the honest sheriff had caught, here and there, and brought single-handed home.

Now there was about him nothing but a sea of grim faces, pressing closer and closer together.

At the halt, some one sang out: "If we can't hang Reynolds, let's hang the crooked sheriff!"

AT this, the sheriff thundered: "I don't mind hanging, but who called me crooked? You did, Luke Harrison? Why, you little dried-up shrimp!"

"Oh, shut up, Steve," said some one. "You know you been crooked. Why not admit it?"

"Who says that I been crooked? *How* have I been crooked?" demanded Steve Lancing. "I went out to stop you from a lynching party. Ain't that the duty of a sheriff? And when I tried to stop you, you laughed at me. And the mulatto that was along with me, when he seen that I couldn't handle the crowd, he went and cut Reynolds loose, and dog-gone me if I blame him! Maybe you'll find that Reynolds'll be turned up here at the jail, as safe and sound as you please!"

It was not a bad speech in the beginning, but it was very unsatisfactory toward the close, and the people let the sheriff know what they thought of it with a derisive howl.

Pringle went three paces up the jail steps and said:

"Boys, it looks this way to me: I always been one to respect and admire Steve Lancing. I would 'a' fought with him or for him any old day. But it looks clear to me that somebody's offered him a pile of money to break Reynolds loose from us."

Now a dozen men, as the sheriff turned his agonized eye right and

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left, answered gruffly that they agreed.

"*Who* would 'a' offered me money?" demanded Lancing.

"Maybe the girl wife done it," said Pringle. "I dunno. Maybe it was her. If the mulatto knew about the mess that Jack was in, she must 'a' known, too! And wouldn't that make her wanta pay hard cash?"

The sheriff groaned.

"Boys, you're wrong. I never took dirty money in my whole life!"

"You never done it before, maybe," said Pringle. "And this here is goin' to be the last time that you do it, too. We're through with you, Lancing."

There was another chorus of assent, and the sheriff groaned again, audibly, like a stricken bull. He saw a lifetime of dangerous and faithful service canceled and made of no avail through the bad luck rather than the sins of a single action. He had put his trust in honest men, until this day. Now he began to feel that there was nothing in the world worthy of faith. And the shock of that discovery was clearly stamped in his face.

Pringle said: "Something's gotta be done. We had Reynolds. I wish that we'd soaked a bullet through his head the minute that we got him, and been through with all the trouble. But we didn't, because we wanted the whole town to see justice done on that murdering hound. We got him clean here, and then you fellows sent out and stopped us, because, by thunder, a pretty young woman had showed up!"

HE made a pause to emphasize his disgust and contempt. There was not a word of answer to him, not so much as a whisper, for the townsfolk were beginning to feel that they had played wretched parts, after all, and had done things for which they would be hissed and mocked in Deerfoot, thereafter. The whole range would laugh. And nothing is so hated by a Westerner as an incident that tends to make his entire community appear ridiculous.

Pringle went on rapidly: "It looks to me like there's only one thing to be done. The sheriff ain't been so wrong that we can fit Reynolds's noose onto his neck. But dog-gone me if we oughtn't to roll him in tar and give him a coat of feathers and ride him out of the town, because we're mighty well through with him!"

The shock of that idea took men aback. But there were savage and willing spirits in that crowd, and they suddenly began to press forward, shouting.

"All right," said Pringle. "Turn loose and do the work, boys. The next sheriff that takes a job in this here town, he's goin' to know the kind of men that he has to deal with, when he deals with us!"

The sheriff, struggling for an instant vainly against his bonds, looked up with agony into the pale-blue sky.

Then he said: "Gents, I'd a lot rather that you shot me. Pull a gun, Harry," he appealed to a bystander, "and put a slug through me for the sake of the old days, will you?"

But Harry shook his head.

"You oughtn't 'a' done it, Steve," he replied. "And, since you went and took money for turnin' Reynolds free, I dunno that you're gettin' more than comes to you!"

Hands were laid on the sheriff. Leering, savage, rejoicing faces appeared before him, men who never had liked him, men who long had writhed under the heavy hand with

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which he occasionally bore down upon the rougher spirits in the town. He could guess what mercy he would receive from them.

A sudden outbreak of voices farther up the street startled him and all the others.

The outcry was shrill and tingling, such as women and children will raise, and now a tumbling crowd of them turned the corner close at hand, gathered around two mounted figures, the first of whom was Jack Reynolds, and behind him Sam, the "mulatto"!

The angry men around the sheriff fell back, aghast. It seemed a day of miracles! There was Reynolds riding toward them, with his hands free, and the mulatto to the rear—Reynolds riding straight into Deerfoot as though into a town filled with friends.

He passed through the startled mob, with a wave of his hand to the right and another to the left.

"Hello, Steve," he said to the sheriff. "Have the fools been trying to take it out on you? Did they think that I'd run away from the *law?*"

CHAPTER XV.

SHANNIGAN SMILES.

THERE is one thing which a small newspaper in a small town is capable of doing. It can reflect the tone of public opinion, and that was what the *Evening Messenger* of Deerfoot succeeded in doing. It came out, not in the evening, as its name implied, but in the middle of the day.

It carried the account of the arrival of "Mrs. Jack Reynolds," and of the stopping of the posse, and, furthermore, it told of the strange events of that morning, the action of the sheriff, the escape of the "prisoner of the people," as it chose to call Reynolds, and the voluntary return of Reynolds.

The *Evening Messenger* took a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together and simply praised every one all around!

It praised the posse for its heroic work in making an arrest. It particularly extended its sympathy to the three men who had been wounded in "the execution of a public duty." They had "unselfishly sacrificed themselves on the altar of the public weal," et cetera.

It praised the "magnificent devotion, beauty, and charm" of "the little woman who crossed a continent" and came in the hour of her husband's trouble. It gave handsome space to the sheriff, also, who had rushed out to make regular take the place of irregular law, and who had broken up the posse and arrested Reynolds.

But when the name of Reynolds was mentioned, there was a fine editorial outburst, which included references to "the somewhat extravagant high spirits of some sons of the best families of the South," and, all in one paragraph, glanced at the heroes of the Blue *and* the Gray, and stormed the ridge with the dying men of Pickett's division, and gallantly galloped with Stuart and Morgan.

But, whatever the extravagances of his conduct, the editor pointed out that nothing had been proved against Mr. Jack Reynolds. His voluntary surrender to the officers of the law after his delivery from the posse strongly indicated an untroubled conscience. And if he had wounded three men, he, after all, had been resisting an "irregular arrest."

The editorial wound up with a fervent hope that peace and quieter times were coming to the town of

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Deerfoot, but it gave warning against a sacrifice of "blood essentially manly, though perhaps too rashly and easily heated."

On the whole, it was just the sort of an editorial to fit the occasion.

The best paragraph of the whole account was that which described how "the unfortunate young wife, hearing finally the true predicament of her husband, hurried to the jail, and when she was admitted, flung herself weeping upon the cold steel bars that separated her from the man she loved, a sight," said the editor, "which caused the sternest eye to moisten."

Yes, it was a very good account, and most of the people of Deerfoot read it at least two or three times through.

IT made them feel that they were indeed on the wild and thorny frontier of the country, and that Deerfoot was filled with heroic men and glorious women. It made them feel generous and kindly toward every one. And as for the indiscretions of Jack Reynolds, "Boys will be boys."

"Mrs. Jack Reynolds," who, after the interview at the jail, "lay exhausted and trembling in her room at the Deerfoot Hotel," was now saying:

"It was a great effect, Sam. You would have loved it. Oh, when I collected myself, and drew myself up on tiptoe, as I saw him, and then let my head fall back and in a kind of swooning, gasping voice cried out: 'My darling!' Oh, if you'd seen that, Sam, you would have been proud of me, you scoundrel. The jailer who was standing by had the tears running down his face, the poor dumb-bell, and he couldn't have seen the files that I passed Jack if they had been hand saws."

"He's a darling, all right," said Shannigan. "The finest young devil that ever wore red spurs, is what he is."

"He's something to look at," said the girl thoughtfully.

"He's a beauty," said Shannigan, eying her narrowly.

"What a head!" said Mary Tracy. "And how it's put on his shoulders!"

"Yes. With a whole neck," said Shannigan.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You know what I mean, Sam," said she. "He's like a statue. He's so full of life that he's walking on clouds."

"I know," said Shannigan, more covertly but more anxiously watching her. "Did you have a chance to talk to him?"

"Of course I did. I had my arms around him—through the bars—and I gave the jailer one tearful look that sank his ship. He backed up to the end of the corridor and turned his back on us. Then I told Jack that he was not to use the files. Not until he had word from you."

"How did he act his part when you showed up?" asked Shannigan.

"He was wonderful—simply wonderful!" said the girl. "He threw up a hand before his face and put on an expression of agony. Then he staggered to the bars and grabbed one in each hand, and held on. Oh, it was a great scene, Shannigan, and the jailer really cried like a baby over us!"

"That was a waste, all right," said Shannigan.

"The moment we had a chance to talk, he wouldn't say a word about anything but you, Sam! What have you done to him?"

"We argued a little, that's all."

"Did you argue with your hands?" she exclaimed.

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"Tell me what happened," answered Shannigan impatiently.

"He said with his second or third breath, when we were alone: 'Who's that mulatto, Mary? Who's that Sam?'

" 'He's one of the old retainers,' said I. 'He's part of the ancestral estate. Didn't you recognize that?'

" 'I kept my face fairly straight in public,' said Jack to me. 'But I've got to break down a little here and now. I've got to learn who Sam the mulatto is.'

" 'He's the devil, and he's on wheels,' said I."

"Thanks, Mary," remarked Shannigan, making a cigarette.

"Servants don't smoke in the room of their mistress," she corrected him.

He crumpled the cigarette silently, and dropped it in his pocket.

SHE went on: "He told me he knew that you were a devil, well enough, and then he wanted to know who had brought you into the case. I said it had been Howison. He remarked that he hadn't realized Howison knew so many *kinds* of useful men. I gathered that Jack doesn't love you very much, Sam."

"I'm not handsome enough for him," said Shannigan. "But that doesn't matter. It's not his money that hires me."

"No money hires you, Sam," the girl told him. "It's the mischief that hires you—and it can hire me, too, after this taste of it."

She began to laugh, strangling the sound as well as she could, though it still continued to bubble over, faintly.

"Go on," he ordered.

"Where was I? Oh, Jack and his questions about you. I told him that you were a white man, and he wanted to know a lot of other things about you, and I had to remind him that I did not have all the time in the world. I gave him a little miniature of you."

"All right. What was it, Mary?" he asked her.

"I can't tell you."

His brow darkened.

"As long as you work with me on this, you tell me everything," he cautioned her, and lifted a forefinger as he said it.

She leaned forward, deep in interest.

"What would you do to me, Sam?" she asked, her bright eyes studying his face. "What way would you take to discipline me?"

"Mary," said Shannigan, "I know that you're a bright girl, and I don't like to hear you talk like a fool. Go on where you left off. What was the miniature?"

"I told him," said the girl, "that if your eye were slower, and your hand weaker, and your brain stupider, and your heart kinder, you'd be a tiger. But, as it was, it would be a pitiful thing to pit a royal Bengal against you, any day of the week."

Shannigan folded his hands. His eyes were dull and emotionless as he regarded her.

"Good, vigorous language," he said. "I like your imagination, Mary. I always *have* liked it."

"He said that he agreed, and that there was something in you that he never had seen in any other man. You must have let him see you in action, Sam, when you took him away from the posse."

Shannigan waved his hand.

"Go on," he said. "When you finished with me, what else?"

"I told him the plan. I told him everything that you wanted me to tell him. About your hope that a

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trial could take place in a day or so, or that the case could be dismissed because of lack of evidence. I told him that the one great stumbling-block was that Lee Swain had telegraphed for information, and that his answer might come in time to blow the 'Reynolds of Alexandria' story as high as a kite. Lee Swain interested him, and he wondered what the little rat could have against him. I said that every little man is always hungering to put down some big one. He shook his head and seemed to think that there must surely be something else behind it."

"He did?" said Shannigan, sitting a little straighter.

"Yes, he did. Then I told him that, unless you found a way to intercept the telegram or put another in its place, the cat would probably be out of the bag to-night or to-morrow morning. And after that we would probably have to try to get him out of the jail—which was the reason for the files. But, in the meantime, you hoped that he could be cleared so far that, even after it had been found that I was only acting, nothing could be done to him. He was perfectly cool and easy. He wanted to know if Howison was directing things, and I told him that Howison was never consulted, but that you were the brains.

"He was only partly pleased. He said that he thought you generally would have your way in the world—that was all he said about it. He asked me to see Howison and thank him. That was about all."

"Nothing to say to you, Mary?" asked Shannigan.

She flushed, and her lips parted; but no speech came.

The inhuman smile touched the lips of Shannigan.

"We don't have to learn about that," he said. "You see that I leave you your essential privacy."

She nodded slowly, as though there were reservations in her mind. Then, starting up, she went to Shannigan and planted herself before him.

"Is there something between you two that makes you hate Jack, and that makes Jack hate you?"

"What could there be?" asked Shannigan.

She shuddered.

"You won't hurt him, Sam, will you?" she asked.

"He's big enough to take care of himself," said Shannigan. "But what do you think? I'm saving his neck—I've saved it from one twisting already, haven't I?"

She drew a breath, but found no words. Her anxious eyes watched her strange employer.

"I'll tell you this," said the girl. "I'd like to know what you think of him, Sam. Do you think that he's right?"

Shannigan looked at her with that smile of old Egypt as he answered: "No man sees another man the way a woman does." He paused. Then he added: "I've hunted up everything that I could learn about him, from the name of his horse to the saloon he liked to drink in. I know a bit about his past, too. He's a wild hawk, and he has a beak and talons. But I believe that he's brave and pretty straight. He's not a saint, and he may not be a hero. Is that enough for you to know?"

"That's all you'll tell me," said the girl. "But you always hold back. You always treat me like a baby. Go away from me, Sam."

"All right," said he patiently.

He rose and went toward the door.

But she followed him with a savage little outburst.

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"I should think that you could be human once in a *year!* Sometimes I hate you, Shannigan!"

"Not so loud," said Shannigan, at the door.

"If you smile," said the girl, "I'll go mad. If I see that horrible mocking smile on your face, I'll lose my wits!"

"I'll look in later on," said Shannigan, and, as the door opened and closed after him, she saw the smile, colder and more inhuman than ever.

Instead of exclaiming, she caught her breath, and huddled into a corner where she sat silently for a long time, staring at the door as though it might open at any instant and a monster enter.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT THE BEST CHANCE.

SHANNIGAN went up the street thoughtfully in the heat of the afternoon until he came to the edge of Deerfoot. The forest began a step beyond, the forest and the upward slope of the mountain. At the very base of it was the Best Chance Saloon.

He stood in the doorway and took off his hat. There were half a dozen men, either at the bar or lounging with one shoulder against the wall of the long and narrow room. There was no good reason why it should have been long and narrow, except that Slim, the proprietor, had so conceived it. All saloons, according to Slim, should be long and narrow, with the bar fitted on one of the long sides of the room.

"Beg your pardon, Mr. Connor," said Shannigan. "Is colored folks allowed in here?"

"*You're* allowed in here, boy," said "Slim" Connor instantly. "Come in and name your poison."

Shannigan entered. As he came through the doorway, a man here and there waved to him, carelessly. There was curiosity and interest in their eyes.

Shannigan bowed to each of them in turn, and seemed to ask their permission one by one as he advanced toward the bar and stepped to the darkest corner of it.

"You ain't so dark, either, Sam," said Slim Connor. "Some of the boys around here, they get blacked up by the sun worse'n you are, a lot!"

"Thank you, sir," said Shannigan. "I *am* kind of pale, some folks say." He beamed on Slim as he spoke.

"Look here," said a bearded man at the bar, turning. "Look here, Sam."

Shannigan came to attention.

"Yes, sir?" said he.

"Aw, take it easy, Sam," said the man of the beard.

"I hope to, sir," said Shannigan anxiously.

The other laughed. They all laughed.

"Look here," went on the bearded fellow. "This morning, at the crack of day, I was out there when you seemed to chuck Jack Reynolds down. Mind you, I ain't bearing any hard feelings about it, neither —but I say, did you really drop Reynolds, or did you both just stumble and go down?"

Shannigan passed his fingers through the woolly black wig that he was wearing.

"Well, sir," he said, "it seemed to me that some of you gentlemen was a mite excited, sir, and when I seen the guns, I had an idea that maybe Mr. Jack and me would do as good on the ground, for a spell, as we would standing up. Them trees was pretty close ahead of us."

"The quickest, the neatest, and the dog-gonedest smartest thing

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that I ever seen. Look like you had lead in your hand, the way that you bowled Jack Reynolds over!" said the bearded man. "You must be pretty strong, Sam. Stand over here and see can you put my hand down. I'm pretty good at that!"

Shannigan, since his hat was off, touched a woolly forelock.

"Ask your pardon, sir," said he. "I ain't been taught to make no contentions against white folks, sir."

This brought forth a little murmur of applause.

SAID Slim Connor, expressing the opinion of the house: "You're a good fellow, Sam. You been raised, is what you been. There's plenty ain't been raised like you been. You know your place, and that's something that makes a hit with me. I'll say this: You're out West, now, where color don't count—it's *men* that figger, out here. But you keep right on the way you're goin'. It won't do you no harm. It'll get you farther forward, in the finish. Name your drink, Sam. You're goin' to drink with me!"

"Thank you, sir. You mean that you're treating me, sir?"

"Yeah, that's what I mean," said Slim. "I'm treating the rest, too. You make a hit with us, Sam. Because you ain't spoiled, and because you're willing to give your skin for young Jack Reynolds. He may be all right. He may be all wrong. We dunno. But we like a boy that sticks to his boss!"

Shannigan rolled his eyes until the big whites of them expanded.

"I was raised a Reynolds, sir," said he, "and I reckon that I gotta die a Reynolds."

"Now, what the devil does he mean by that?" asked the bearded man.

Slim Connor explained: "When they been raised in the South, brother, and raised right, they hitch right onto the family that they live with. They hitch to 'em, and they stay to 'em. Here's to you, boy!"

He raised his glass of whisky, the same drink which had been served to the rest of the loiterers, and tossed it off.

Shannigan had waited until the others drank. Then he lifted his glass of beer.

"Thank you very kindly, Mr. Connor," he said. "Thank you all, very much, gentlemen." Then he swallowed some of the beer—seemed to notice that the other glasses were already empty—and then poured down the glassful with one swallow.

A shout of applause greeted this gesture.

"Where'd you learn my name, Sam?" asked Connor. "It ain't hung outside the door."

"Mr. Reynolds," said Sam, "he told me this morning that the place to drink my beer in Deerfoot was the place of Mr. Connor, called the Best Chance Saloon. He said that Mr. Connor was a very kind gentleman, and he said you had the best place, sir. He said that the last time he had a drink in Deerfoot, it was in your saloon, sir."

"Now, that ain't any lie, neither," said Slim. "Because that's just what happened. He was in here with Powell and Halpin, the poor devils."

He lowered his voice as he added these names, and a distinct cloud fell upon the group. The men looked gloomily down to the floor.

"He told me that," said Shannigan, "after I finished beggin' him not to come back to Deerfoot, and to go and run away and save himself, sir. He told me to shut my silly mouth, was his words. He can

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speak mighty cross, when his temper is up!"

"Yeah, and that ain't any lie," said one of the men sourly.

"You mean that you were tryin' to persuade him away from Deerfoot?" broke in Slim Connor eagerly.

"It looked like kind of dangerous for him," said Shannigan. "That's the way it looked to me. But Mr. Jack, sir, he said that, as long as he was a free man and didn't have no posse hangin' around his neck, he'd go and give himself up to the law, because he never done no murder in his life, and never would do. And he said that the folks in Deerfoot would give him a fair chance, once they got kind of cooled down."

"Did he say that?" asked several voices at the same time.

"He said that, sir," said Shannigan. "And then I reckon that he'd just about as soon die, after seein' Mrs. Jack, as live closed off away from her."

A bald-headed man, very fat, with a sheen of perspiration on his skin, spoke up for the first time.

"A gent gets more out of a simple fellow like this than he does out of the newspaper and a pile of talk," said he. "Dog-gone me if I don't begin to lean toward Jack Reynolds. He's only a kid, anyway."

"He's only a kid, and kind of wild in the blood," agreed another. "That's the only trouble with him."

"I disremember who it was," said a third man. "I disremember what his name was, that I was standing on the off side of at a bar, one night down there at Spooky Wallace's saloon, in the middle of town——"

"I never liked Spooky's whisky much," put in Slim Connor.

"Well," said the narrator, "I disremember which his name was, but he was orderin' a drink, and reachin' in his pocket, when he said: 'Dog-gone it, the cash has run out.' And he started and pulled around to start for the door. And there was Jack Reynolds on the near side of him that said: 'Why, I seen you put your change in this pocket, stranger!' 'Did I?' says the gent. And he reaches in and brings out a twenty-dollar gold piece.

"Well, nobody gets that for *change*. And he takes and gives a look at Jack, and he says: 'Sure, I must 'a' forgotten about the change. And maybe I'll forget where I put my change another time, too. But I'll never forget *you*, Reynolds.'

"That's what he says, and has reason for saying; but, dog-gone me, he *did* forget. And the other day he was one of them that was howlin' Reynolds down!"

"Too bad," said several voices.

"The way I see it," said Slim Connor, "Jack Reynolds had oughta have a chance. And this here town oughta give it to him."

A quiet voice said in the doorway: "He'll have his chance. He'll have his chance to kill more men, and I half hope they'll be some of you!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE EXCITED MAN.

THAT was little Lee Swain, standing against the glow of the late afternoon. People jerked their heads around and stared at him. They were ready to take rough action, hearing such crisp talk, but the very smallness of the man and his "tenderfoot" clothes gave them pause. Besides, Lee Swain was a blameless character, and the sort of a fellow that makes a town—a solid citizen, with lots of ready cash to invest in interesting proposals.

So, instead, of a volley of oaths, he was greeted with a silence.

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He stepped through the doorway, and ran his eyes up and down the line of faces.

"One day you boys will taste the edge of him a little deeper," said Swain. "This trick of turning himself up for justice—only a trick, and nothing to it!"

He turned sharply around, and to the bare-legged lad who had followed him to the door of the saloon he said:

"Go back to the telegraph office, and if a message comes for me, bring it up here. I'll be waiting for an hour or so!"

"Now, Mr. Swain," said Slim Connor, "here's Sam, that tried to persuade Jack Reynolds to run for his life, this morning, and Jack insisted on coming straight back to Deerfoot and taking trial."

"Does he say that?" asked Swain, turning abruptly on Shannigan.

Shannigan looked at the boots of the other.

Little Lee Swain advanced quickly upon him.

"You say that you were trying to persuade him to run to save his neck, and that he insisted on coming back to Deerfoot?" demanded Swain.

Shannigan slowly, deliberately turned his shoulder toward Swain, and looked at the proprietor.

"Mr. Connor, sir," he said, "would you kindly talk to this gentleman for me?"

It brought a literal gasp from those who listened. It was the perfect retort, a devastating stroke, the only possible way in which he could have insulted Swain and retained the sympathy of every man in the room.

Slim Connor said instantly: "Mr. Swain, maybe it ain't right to go after the boy, there. All he knows ain't much. But he knows he loves his boss. Right or wrong, I guess that we gotta put up with it."

No matter how acid the nature of Swain, when he encountered the gloomy brows that surrounded him, he could not help but understand that they considered him abysmally in the wrong. Their heads were lowered, and they looked up at him like so many angry bulls, prepared to charge.

They would never guess, these fellows, that *he* was armed, and in the most efficient style. They would never dream of the revolver that hung heavily under the pit of his left arm. He hoped, for that matter, that he could keep them in ignorance as to that point forever. But one day, perhaps, he would have to cut his way through a few of them, and then surprise might help him as much as bullets.

He stepped to the bar.

He said, briskly but dryly: "Boys, I've lost my temper. I don't change my mind about Reynolds. And I don't relish the backwash from Reynolds's man. But I think I've been wrong, here. And I hope I'm old enough and wise enough to admit it. We'll have a drink, if you don't say no."

THEY did not say no. The line of glasses was filled. Only that of Shannigan remained empty, and, with a murmur to the bartender and with a bow that included the rest, Shannigan backed out of the swinging doors to the street.

All eyes followed him, even those of Mr. Lee Swain, with a gleaming side glance.

The drink went down.

"I'm sorry that I broke out," Swain said. "I don't mean to take the fault of the master on the head of the servant. But, boys, there's

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just something about all this business that's too pat. Mr. Sam, yonder, talks a little too simple to suit me. Maybe I'm wrong. I hope I am. Maybe I'm wrong about Reynolds. I hope that, too. What have I to gain by finding the boy in trouble? But I have to tell you what is in my mind, because I'm afraid that I've made a wrong impression, and a bad impression, here. Slim, give me another glass of beer, if you don't mind, and I'll have it in the back room."

He retired with the drink, accordingly.

The bearded man said: "He made me mad, Swain did. But he's all right. You know what I mean. He's a waspy kind of a little hornet; but, dog-gone me, I like a man that'll admit when he's wrong. Dog-gone me if I don't."

There was a murmur of agreement. Enough drinks had been circulating, of late, to make every one extremely lenient even to his most bitter enemy.

"Look at the way that Sam backed out," said the bearded man. "Now, dog-gone me, I like him. Take him this morning—he throwed himself right into the middle of trouble. Did bullets faze him? They did not! He run through gunfire like nothing at all, all the while thinking of his boss, not of himself. But here comes along a ruction, and his boss ain't here to fight for, and right away he ducks out, even after he seen that we liked him and that we was on his side. Simple, is what he is, and straight."

"I think a pile more of Reynolds on account of him," said Slim Connor. "I learned in school—you can judge the master by the man. There's something in that, too."

"Sure there is," agreed another.

"Just a plain, common fellow with a good heart in him," said Slim Connor, whisky and sentiment rather mastering him.

The plain, common fellow was at that moment cautiously peering through a crack in the log wall of the rear of Slim Connor's place.

Now and then he glanced inside, and now and then he looked to the side, where two or three breaks in the brush gave him a view of the street, near the saloon, so that he could see any one approaching from the town side.

That was plain and honest Sam!

His interest in Mr. Lee Swain had grown with every meeting, and now it had reached the degree of a passion.

So he stared through the narrow crack, and gradually brought Swain within the easy compass of his eye.

THE little man was by no means at ease. He shifted to one side of his chair, and then to the other.

Presently he rose and walked the floor.

He leaned over and scanned that floor close. He reached down and picked from a crack among the boards a small fragment of something, and then threw it away, as though disappointed. It rattled into a corner.

He sat down again at the table, sipped his beer, lighted his pipe, smoked a puff, and then let the pipe go out while he stared straight before him at his thoughts.

Whatever the thoughts were, they were exciting enough to make him grip and flex his hand a number of times.

Shannigan began to smile to himself. That excitement was not altogether the excitement of an ordinary man. It was that of a man watching a horse race—yes, when he

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has bet heavily upon one of the contenders, bet more than he can afford to lose.

Lee Swain had a great reputation for scrupulous honesty in the town of Deerfoot, but reputations meant nothing to the man whose eye was fixed upon the little fellow through the crack in the wall.

Presently Swain pushed back the flap of his coat, and from a pocket of his dark-gray worsted suit he extracted a small piece of stone, which he turned this way and that in his fingers.

It was not a jewel. It was too large for that. And yet the expression of Swain was that of a man who is looking down upon the fire of a pigeon's-egg ruby, or a flaming diamond, or the impenetrably cool depths of a great emerald.

The interest of the watcher grew apace, and on his face began to appear that inhuman smile which had chilled the blood of Mary Tracy, on this day.

That bit of rock—now he could see that it was no more—had a definite and keen interest to Mr. Lee Swain.

So had the floor.

Because, from time to time, he turned his eyes down toward the floor, and considered it with a sweeping and then a minute glance, with some hope and some fear in his face.

Once he got up, went to the far corner of the room to which he had flung the bit he formerly picked out of a crack, and reëxamined it. He started to put it in his vest pocket, after a critical examination. Then he changed his mind, put the bit into a crack, and then pushed it down with his heel.

Having done this, he snapped his fingers, laughed a little, silently, and then returned to his chair. Keenly and closely the watcher marked that spot on the floor.

Now, in his chair, Mr. Lee Swain drew out again the little fragment of stone. He turned and twisted it this way and that, until finally a ray of light struck on the flat surface of it, and the watcher at the crack saw a golden glint of light.

He winced a little lower in his place, as he saw this. For there was only one explanation. There was gold in the bit of stone!

That would explain the excitement of Mr. Lee Swain. That would explain the gleam in his eye and the tenseness of his voice. Gold!

Well, many things will be done, in this world, for the sake of gold. The mind of Shannigan opened and bloomed like a flower, in the multitude of possibilities that flooded upon him.

He was thinking of Jack Reynolds and the enmity which the little man had toward him. To that thought, Shannigan added the idea of gold. He was not one to try to make everything meet in a moment. He was willing to add evidence to evidence, and let the sum total speak for itself.

He had noticed these things, and had some quick reflections upon them, when he saw, through a gap in the brush toward the street, the same bare-legged boy who had left Mr. Lee Swain at the door of the saloon, now scurrying up the street once more. He rose at once and started to meet him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TELEGRAM.

As Shannigan went along, he took from his pocket a telegraph envelope, glanced at the typewritten address, which proclaimed the name of Lee Swain, and

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then hurriedly replaced the envelope. He hastened onto the street.

As he did so, turning down toward the town, he encountered the scurrying boy. Shannigan tripped, or appeared to do so, and the ponderous weight of his shoulder grazed the lad and knocked him spinning.

He did not fall, but the telegraph envelope which he carried in his hand dropped to the ground.

Shannigan instantly picked it up, made it disappear with a crunch of his thumb against the palm of his hand, and in its place offered back to the youngster that other telegraph envelope which he had ready in his pocket.

"Mighty sorry, boss," said Shannigan.

The boy caught his breath, for he had run a distance.

"Hey," said he, "you wanta look where you're goin'!"

"Yes, sir, boss," murmured Shannigan.

He turned, with helpless eyes, and watched the lad scurry on.

There appeared before him the bearded man, saying: "I seen that!"

"Did you?" asked Shannigan, with a sudden but strangely subdued interest in his eyes.

"Yeah," said the man of the beard, "I seen it. The kid, he oughta be skinned, bumpin' into somebody, and then blamin' him. I'm goin' to go back in there and hide that kid."

Shannigan stepped before the man of the beard, and raised his hand.

"Don't do that, mister. He didn't mean no harm. He was just a parcel excited. That was all that was the matter with him. Don't you bother him, sir!"

The man of the beard smiled.

"You're a good fellow, Sam," he said. "You got a good nature, too. Come along downtown with me, Sam, because I'm goin' to buy you a drink. I'm goin' to buy you a whole flock of drinks."

"Thank you, sir," answered Shannigan. "But I guess I better be getting back to Mrs. Jack, sir. She might be havin' a need of me—and Sam has had his drink of beer, already!"

So he left the man of the beard, and turned straightway back through the brush, as soon as he saw the other well ahead of him, and circled until he had come to the back room of the saloon.

There he saw Mr. Lee Swain reading a telegram, over and over, and shaking his head, as he considered it.

Shannigan knew well enough how that telegram read, for he had himself typewritten it.

LEE SWAIN DEERFOOT
INVESTIGATED CAREFULLY STOP FOUND THE FAMILY HOMESTEAD OF THE REYNOLDS FAMILY AND ASKED ABOUT THEM AMONG THE NEIGHBORS STOP VERY RESPECTABLE PEOPLE AND OLD FAMILY
SIGNED
BRESFX

He had been able to make up the telegram well enough, according to his own wishes as to how it should read.

The signature, of course, he could not guess. So he had compiled a colossal misspelling: "Bresfx!"

That had no meaning, of course.

He carefully and soundlessly opened the other telegram, the true telegram which he held crumpled in his hand, and which he had purloined from the messenger.

It read:

NO SUCH FAMILY NEAR ALEXANDRIA STOP WENT INTO MATTER THOROUGHLY STOP ADVISE RECHECK EVERYTHING
SIGNED
FAIRFAX

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The signature was what delighted him most.

"Bresfx" was a typographical error that might, with a twist of the mind, he contorted into a misspelling of "Fairfax." The more he stared at that real signature, the more pleased he was with things in general.

Then he turned his attention, once more, to the man inside the room.

LEE SWAIN had risen from his chair, and now, crumpling the telegram, he hurled it on the floor and actually stamped upon it, exclaiming:

"It's wrong—it's got to be wrong! It couldn't possibly be otherwise!"

How wrong it was, only the spy at the crack in the wall could have said, and he was silent.

Finally, Lee Swain rose and left the room, striding out boldly and with a savage expression of disdain and disgust upon his face.

"A man to watch!" said Shannigan to himself.

For always he had found the little man against him, and always he had found Lee Swain in the right, so far as this business went.

Rather grimly he pondered upon this problem.

Then, when he thought that Swain had gone a sufficient distance from the saloon, he rose, walked to the street, and entered the Best Chance again.

The proprietor welcomed him with a wave of the hand.

"Sorry that you backed out, Sam!" said he.

"You know, sir," said Shannigan, "when white folks get all heated up, it's a lot better for colored people to raise a dust and get away, ain't it?"

"You know your own business, Sam," said Slim Connor, with more truth than he knew. "Have a drink?"

"Mr. Connor," said Shannigan, "you mind me askin' you a big favor?"

There was no one else in the saloon. Connor smiled almost fondly on this exemplary Negro.

"I tell you what, boy," he said; "you could ask quite a lot from me, and I really mean it."

"Well, sir," said Shannigan, "they's a back room, in yonder, and maybe I could have a chance to drink a quiet glass of beer in yonder where no one would see me and start askin' questions." He added: "You understand, sir. All the way on the train and the stage there wasn't no beer. Mrs. Jack, she don't drink nothin', sir. Hardly no coffee nor tea, even!"

Slim Connor laughed loud and raucously.

"Well, you can make up time right in this place, brother," he declared. "Here's a glass of beer for you. Take it along."

Shannigan took the proffered glass and retired.

In the back room of the saloon, he pulled back from the table a chair, and let it scrape noisily. Then he settled down, and remained quiet for a moment, while his eye relocated on the floor the exact spot at which the little fragment had been stamped into a crack by Lee Swain.

When he was sure of the spot, he drew from his pocket a clasp knife with a blade of the unnecessary length of at least four inches.

That formidable blade he opened, smiled down at it with a familiar eye, and then went to the place that he had marked through the chink in the logs.

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HE drew the point of the knife down the crack, angling the blade to the side, and turning up a stiff little black furrow of moist dust. In that dust were fragments and whole matches, and grains of various sorts—and in it, also, was a perceptible little fragment of stone.

That was what he salvaged and took back with him to his chair. It was only a small bit, hardly half an inch long, and much less than that in thickness.

It was a dark stone, black at the outer edge, and a blackish brown toward the center. He looked at the edges, and then he looked at one side. On the other side he saw a thing that startled him. It was a mere gleam of yellow, but when he looked more closely he was able to make out a very faint indentation that moved regularly across the surface of the shard.

"Wire gold," said Shannigan, softly and to himself.

He lifted his ugly face and repeated, with a strange intentness: "Wire gold!"

And then he laughed, though even in his own mind there was burning up a furious eagerness, a fire of interest.

He could not look at that broken shard for a moment without being willing to swear that it had something to do with his mystery, and certainly he could swear that Mr. Lee Swain was not an altogether innocent man.

How he could connect Swain with the imbroglio, Shannigan could not tell, as yet; but some connection there must be, more vital than Swain's mere angry devotion to law and order.

The gold was behind everything!

He closed his eyes, and began to ponder the matter carefully. The fragment of gold-tainted rock which Swain had stamped down into the crack in the floor, that other bit of rock which he had seen Swain take from his vest pocket—these were things which Shannigan tried to fit together with Swain's curious dislike for the young Reynolds.

But he could not make head or tail of the business. The gaps in it were too great.

He stood up, at last, and walked out into the dimness of twilight, through which he walked down to the jail.

The jailer swiftly patted him to make sure that no weapons or other supplies were being carried, and then admitted him to see Reynolds.

"I'm going down the corridor, here, a little ways, Sam," he said kindly, "so that you can swap lies with your master. Understand? Don't you be trying to pass him no electric drills, nor nothing like that!"

"No, sir," said Shannigan. "I reckon, when Mr. Jack wants to leave this jail, he'll just stand up and walk out, sir!"

The jailer laughed sardonically. Going back down the corridor, as he had promised, he tilted against the wall a chair which was placed near the hanging lamp. There he sat down, and picked up a chunk of Sunday newspaper, filled with enticing advertisements, with pictures of stylish clothes, with prints of the ladies and gentlemen of the land, and with a few details of lurid crimes.

In these things the jailer lost himself, not for the first but the twentieth time; and, biting his nails, with his head thrusting forward, he stared round-eyed at what the print was telling.

Shannigan was standing close to the bars of Reynolds's cell, talking rapidly.

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CHAPTER XIX.

REYNOLDS TALKS.

BIG Jack Reynolds had been lying down, which is the habit of most cow-punchers. When they are out of the saddle, it is little rest to them to take in a chair practically the same position that they have been holding all day long.

Now Reynolds sat up, reached for his cigarette makings, and waved his hand toward the visitor. He was a graceful fellow, was Reynolds, and the smile with which he met Shannigan could hardly fail to bring a pleasant response in the expression of another man. But Shannigan did not smile in return.

"Hello, bo," said he.

Reynolds shrugged his shoulders. After all, he preferred this sort of talk to the servile lingo which Shannigan had talked to him before.

"Hello, Sam," said Reynolds.

He rose and walked close to the bars.

"You don't have to be too close," said Shannigan. "I'm not going to pass you anything. Just some ideas."

"Blaze away," said Reynolds.

"Where does Lee Swain's nervous system connect with yours?"

"I don't know. I hear the little swine is trying to double-cross me."

"He wants you to take a long rest, is all. You know the bunk that Mary and I worked up about the old Virginia home?"

"They're likely to break through that. Why couldn't you stick a little closer to the facts?"

"We didn't have you to tell us the facts," said Shannigan. "All we knew was that you'd kept your mouth shut about your past. You had to have a wife to weaken the hemp, so to speak. So we gave you a wife and a happy home in the past, all together. Swain is a doubter. He wired back. He got this answer to-day: 'No such family near Alexandria. Went into matter thoroughly. Advise recheck everything.' The telegram was signed 'Fairfax.'"

"Then the ground will rise and the sky drop, and the lot of us will be smashed in between," said Reynolds. "This looks like a pretty bad business!" He added: "How do you know what was in Swain's telegram?"

"I got the real one away from the messenger, and gave him a phony one which said that everything was all right and that the Reynolds were well known."

"How did you know what name to sign?"

"I didn't. I signed a mistake—a telegraphic error. But the misspelling happened to end with an 'FX.' That may make it ride with Swain."

"If it doesn't, can he check up?"

"Of course he can. At the telegraph office."

"And then?"

"And then 'Mrs. Jack Reynolds' will be asked to leave town, or even arrested as an impostor, and you'll be taken out of jail and the lynching party resumed, and I'll be hanged on the same tree beside you."

Reynolds stared. He said not a word.

"What's the first thing that comes into your mind?" asked Shannigan.

"Who is Mary?" asked the other.

"That's the first thing that comes into your mind?"

"Yes," said Reynolds.

"You like her, eh?" asked Shannigan, with an expressionless face.

"Is she your wife?" asked Reynolds.

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SHANNIGAN smiled. There was no more meaning in that smile than in the granite lips of an Egyptian colossus. "She's not my wife," said he. "What's your next idea, Reynolds?"

"Who are you?"

"You're full of curiosity," remarked Shannigan. "Better start that mind working on another train."

"Anything you say."

"You might think something about stones."

Reynolds shrugged his wide shoulders again.

"I don't see the point of that joke," he said.

"Don't you?"

"No."

"That black rock, with wire gold in it."

This brought Reynolds, with a jump, close to the bars of the cell.

"Who the devil put that in your mind?" he asked.

"Swain."

"Swain?" A savage look crossed the eyes of Reynolds. "What does Swain know?"

"A lot more than I do," said Shannigan.

"That may be, too. What *do* you know?"

"I know that you're still close to hanging, that Swain has a piece of gold ore in his vest pocket, and that he wants you put out of the way. Does that make a story for you?"

"Swain!" exclaimed Reynolds.

He fell into a study.

"Swain knows something, then," he muttered.

He looked up sharply at Shannigan.

"Look here, Sam," he said. "Did it ever occur to you that *somebody* killed poor Halpin and Powell out there on the Owens Desert?"

"I've had other things to think about, but I've thought of that, too."

"D'you suppose that Swain could have done it?"

"I don't know. He doesn't seem the fellow for violence, but these complicated chaps like Swain may be full of all sorts of possibilities. He might have killed them. On the other hand, he may not even know one end of a gun from the other."

"Somebody killed 'em!" said Reynolds darkly.

"And you didn't, eh?"

"No, I didn't. That's straight."

"I think it is. Anything you can say that will put it right?"

"I can say ten million dollars' worth of words," said Reynolds, flushing.

"Can you?"

"Yes."

"You don't have to say them to me. Say them to anybody you please—if the ten million will help to save your neck."

Reynolds frowned more darkly. "Look here," said he. "Isn't it a fact that you had the wind of coin behind this deal, and that's what brought you out of the dark?"

Shannigan grinned broadly, without malice, the smile of a child filled with pleasure at a thought.

"I can only say yes or no to that," he said. "You ought not to ask questions like that, son. It isn't just wise."

"I'll put it another way, then," said Reynolds. "You knew what Halpin and Powell had found, eh?"

"I know nothing about it. But I guess that it was gold."

"Powell and Halpin found in the Owens the biggest strike of gold that I ever dreamed of."

"Go on. And try to fit the back room of the Best Chance Saloon into the picture."

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REYNOLDS started. "That's where Halpin and Powell took me. I'd loaned them some money. They were jailbirds, but they were all right, in their way.

"I gave them a hand. They called it a prospecting stake. And they came back to Deerfoot and took me to the back room of Slim Connor's place and showed me their samples.

"They'd found an outcrop of black boulders and glint of yellow where a chip had been knocked off. They broke up a stone. It was full of wire gold. They dug and hit the vein. They opened it up a little. It was eighteen inches wide. Not all wire gold. You know, that wouldn't be possible. There were just streaks and pockets full of that stuff—double handfuls of gold, here and there, just to cheer up a hard-working miner. Powell was nearly crazy as he talked about it; so was Halpin. They showed me the samples."

"Something happened to those samples," said Shannigan.

"No, nothing."

"Think back. Something happened."

"No, not a thing. They dropped off the table, some of them. That was all. And Halpin was after Powell for his carelessness."

"You picked 'em all up?"

"Yes, carefully."

"You couldn't be careful," said Shannigan. "You were all blind and crazy with gold fever. When those samples broke, you left a few of the splinters behind. I have one of 'em that I saw Swain stamp into a crack in the floor. Swain has a larger bit."

Reynolds frowned. "That brings Lee Swain closer to the killing of Powell and Halpin," he declared. "Look at it this way: He has the sample. He knew that Powell and Halpin had them, and that I had seen 'em. Powell and Halpin die. They're murdered as they sink a shaft in the Owens gravel. And when I find the bodies and hurry for Deerfoot to report what I've seen, a posse mets me—Lee Swain has found the bodies even before me, even before I have time to get back with water! He's found 'em, and hurried to town to give the alarm and accuse me—because I'd left Deerfoot that day, earlier, with the pair. You see?"

"Not entirely," said Shannigan. "But you have a bright mind, Jack I like to see it work. Go right ahead."

Reynolds was willing enough to talk.

"It's clear to me. Lee Swain, or men working for him, did the trick. I understand that he started that morning, even earlier than the three of us did. He was heading for the Willejee Mountains, he said, and he intended to take the straight cut across the desert. Mind you, he started before us, but we didn't pass him on the way. And yet he must have been later. He must have been hours and hours later, because we'd reached a place in line with the big strike of ore, and we'd worked a long time at it, before I went to get water and left Halpin and Powell behind me. Now, mind you, he left Deerfoot before us, and headed straight for the Willejees, and we did not pass him on the trail; and yet he came up hours and hours after us, and found the two dead men. Kind of strange, Sam?"

"Strange," said Shannigan. "But there's not a straight trail. After he hit the desert, he might have wandered."

"Yes, a little. But he would have had the Willejees ahead of him all the way, to keep him fairly straight.

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How did he happen to be *hours* behind us—after starting earlier? That's the point! I never thought of it before!"

"But why would he kill the pair of 'em and leave you?"

Reynolds walked up and down, thinking. And as he shook his head, Shannigan said:

"It's possible to be outside that back room of Slim Connor's, and yet know everything that happens inside it. I know, because I've just done it. If something put Swain there, if he saw you three, and the samples and heard some of the talk, if he were ready to follow the three of you the next morning, if he followed and saw from a distance that your were digging, he would be sure that it was the shaft from which you'd taken the samples, eh? And one of those samples he had in his pocket—wire gold!"

"That's correct!"

"He sees them digging. He sees Mr. Straight-shot Reynolds go off. He takes an easy chance and shoots the other two, close up, so close that he can risk head shots. He goes to the shaft, then, and finds——"

He paused.

Reynolds put in: "Nothing. It was Halpin that wanted to make the try there on the way to the real spot. But he was wrong. At least, we didn't go deep enough to hit the vein."

"Swain finds nothing, as you say. He's killed two men to get the gold mine. He's intended to kill the third man, when the third man comes back. But now he finds that there's no gold mine, after all—and two men dead on his hands. So he uses the third man to carry away the guilt of the double murder. Does that seem logical to you, Reynolds?"

"How could little Lee Swain do these things?"

"I don't say that he did. He may have had a whole gang along with him. But, on the other hand, he's a fellow of resolution, and Judge Colt is sure enough a great equalizer of persons."

Reynolds nodded. "I think the thing is straight as a string," said he. "But how can we hang it on Swain?"

"That needs quiet surroundings and thought," said Shannigan, "and before I leave I want some more hard facts from you."

CHAPTER XX.

MARY'S IDEA.

SHANNIGAN went out of the jail and almost stumbled over Lee Swain. The little man halted fast in the middle of the sidewalk, and tapped the arm of Shannigan as the latter started by.

Shannigan turned and touched his forehead in salute.

"Yes, sir?" said he.

Lee Swain stepped closer and looked hard and carefully into the eyes of Shannigan—the thoughtful stare of a man who is examining a botanical specimen under a microscope, perhaps?

When he had finished his examination, which Shannigan endured with a patient humility, Swain said sharply:

"You're no more of a mulatto than I am!"

"Have you got some colored blood in you, Mr. Swain?" asked Shannigan gently.

"I have as much as you have," said Swain. "As for your skin——"

He swept his glance over the face of the big man, and then turned on his heel and walked rapidly down the street.

Shannigan did not glance after him. He went on with an immobile

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face to the hotel, and to the room of Mary Tracy.

She was there—she was always there; it was her rôle to be there, overwhelmed with grief, as long as her "husband" was in any danger.

When Shannigan knocked, a tremulous voice called: "Yes?"

He opened the door without further invitation, and found her stretched on the bed, with her face to the wall, and a handkerchief at her eyes.

"Yes?" quavered her voice, again.

"Are your eyes red, Mary?" asked Shannigan.

She jumped to her feet, smiling.

"They're not red," said Shannigan.

"They would have been before I budged," said she. "One rub from the corners to the center of the eyelid will do the trick. Then, one looks down, and keeps a handkerchief near the mouth, and turns partly away."

"Why do you look down?" asked Shannigan.

"Well, that puts the eyelashes against the cheeks. And any blockhead—or rather, blockheads particularly—can easily imagine a bit of moisture in long, dark lashes like mine."

"You've been adding yourself up, lately, Mary," said he.

"Yes," she answered.

"What's the sum total?" he asked.

"Oh, it's a pretty big sum total," said the girl. "Except for my nose. Confound my nose, Sam. It ought to be bigger. The nose spoils everything. I'd be a big sum total, but if there's one bad figure it makes the whole amount wrong. Why can't I have more nose? You can do anything, Sam. Grow some more nose on this face of mine."

"And you'll be able to catch Reynolds?" said he.

"That's the present idea," said the girl.

"There are better things than Jack, in the world," said Shannigan.

"He'll do," she answered.

"You don't need a new nose," answered Shannigan. "He likes you the way you are. Don't try to change the picture while he's satisfied with it."

"Come here where the light falls on your face, Sam," she begged. "I never can tell when you're mocking me."

"Reynolds knows that he's still only an inch or two from hanging, but he's more interested in you than he is in his neck."

"Do you swear that, Sam?" she asked, delighted.

"I don't swear it. He's too young to know his mind. So are you," said Shannigan.

"You don't like Jack?" she queried.

"He's all right," said Shannigan. "But he's young. That's all."

"You could like him better than you do."

"Yes, I could, but I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because I want you for myself, of course," said Shannigan, with a yawn.

He sat down and made a cigarette.

"You can't smoke here, Sam," said she. "Whoever heard of a mulatto house boy smoking in the presence of his mistress?"

Once more, he pinched the tobacco and wisp of paper together, and dropped them into his pocket.

"What *do* you think of me, Sam?" she asked him.

"I think too much," said Shannigan, with that impenetrable smile which she hated more than anything in the world. "But if you mean the other way—I think you're a little young, Mary, but you have talents.

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You have some face, too, but quite a bit of talent behind it."

She sat down in turn, and sighed.

"What's the news?" she asked. "Is there any?"

"Some," said he. "Swain's telegram came back. I switched it in the messenger's hand. Swain got the fake message saying the Reynoldses are all right. I have the real message that says they don't exist. I had to fake a signature. Swain may find it out at the telegraph office, and that would break everything. We're walking on a tight wire. We have to get quick action. Lee Swain murdered Powell and Halpin because he had evidence they'd discovered a tremendously valuable gold mine. He intended to get Reynolds, too, but he was thrown off that idea by finding them digging an empty hole in the desert. He threw the blame on Jack."

"I knew he was innocent," said the girl. "I knew it. But I love you, Sam, for telling me so!"

"Sit down," said he. "You're being silly. Swain killed the pair of them, he knows that I'm not a mulatto, and he's on the trail of the gold mine, on the one hand, and the truth about the Reynolds of Alexandria, on the other. I wish that I'd picked out a more obscure place than Alexandria. But that's behind us. I tell you that we're still on the edge of the cliff. If this town finds out that you've bamboozled them—you and I—it'll run you out of town, or even jail you. And it'll lynch me and Reynolds. We have to move fast. I told Howison, to-day, to see the judge and press for action, and now I'll find out what the judge thinks. Keeps your nerves steady. Be a thoroughbred. And we still may pull through."

He got up and went to the door.

"Can Swain be such a man as you say?" said she. "I think he can. He has a snaky eye. He has the meanest eye I ever faced, except——"

She stopped herself quickly.

"Except mine?" he asked carelessly. "You have the tongue for pretty nothings, in your talk, Mary. Keep your brain working. Everything may depend on you. If the pinch comes, I may have to break away and leave you in the lurch, while I try to take care of Reynolds. Are you prepared for that?"

"I'm prepared for anything," said the girl. "Anything that will save him. Is he *really* thinking about me?"

"I can't be coming to your room all the time," said he. "If the judge is against Reynolds, I'll come by, presently, and tap once. If he's for Jack, I'll tap twice. If he's practically decided to quash the case, I'll tap three times."

He left her with her last question unanswered and found Howison in the hall, going toward his room with a brisk step. Even through the dim light, his smile was very easily visible.

He paused, murmuring rapidly: "Can't be seen talking in a friendly way with you, man. But I've seen the judge. I pressed in the name of law and order, for a strong procedure against Reynolds. That was my cue, of course. But the judge has made up his mind. He says that there is nothing but circumstantial hearsay against Reynolds and that he won't believe that there is a case against him until something more to the point is brought up against him.

"What counts with the judge was that Reynolds rode out of town with the two and was heading back for Deerfoot without them. The judge swears that if Reynolds had actually quarreled with the pair and killed

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them, he would not have been such a fool as to come straight back into the arms of justice. Besides, Reynolds is a steady friend, and he has showed friendship to Powell and Halpin in other days. My dear fellow, the judge is going to quash the case when it's brought up to-morrow; he won't have it for trial unless there's new evidence."

He paused, with a gasp of relief.

"The lawyer I sent for will be here in the morning," he went on swiftly, "and by noon, I expect to see Jack a free man. We'll get him out of this part of the world at once—and no matter what your bill is, Shannigan, I'll tell you now that it will be too small for the services you've rendered."

Shannigan answered: "Maybe we can hold things together till to-morrow. I don't know. Lee Swain is on the warpath. He's the murderer. There's a gold mine behind the pretty little deal. I think the devil will be to pay before the end of things. Go back to your room, and digest that. I haven't time to tell you more. I'm going down to the dining room to have supper in a corner, the way servant ought to, when there's not a servants' dining hall."

Leaving the other fairly staggered, Shannigan went on with his easy, silent step toward the head of the stairs.

CHAPTER XXI.

SWAIN'S DISCOVERY.

LARGE-HEARTED men are not apt to give particular attention to details. Lee Swain was not large-hearted, and his life was chiefly employed in paying the very strictest attention to the very smallest of details.

That which troubled him now, discounting or destroying all of the previous efforts that he had made against young Jack Reynolds, was the telegram which had arrived, announcing that there was such a family near Alexandria. There was not a flaw except the misspelling of the signature, one of the typical telegraphic errors, it seemed.

No particular thought of that was in the mind of Lee Swain, no doubt of the message's reality, at least, as he turned into the street that led past the telegraph office. That office represented the terminal to which the railroad was planning to build its branch line.

When Lee Swain passed it, he stopped, suddenly, and glared at the window with the red-painted letters stretched across it. He had been specially aroused since encountering Shannigan outside the jail. He felt that he had overstepped himself. In the first place, he could not really be sure that the other was a white man; in any place, he should have kept his thoughts to himself.

Being thoroughly irritated, now, he wanted some one to rage at.

That, and that reason only, took him into the telegraph office.

The operator was a youth who had divided his soul between two great aspirations: One was to be a grocery clerk who wore leather cuffs and a pencil behind his ear, and used an order book with carbon sheets between the pages. The second great urge was to be a stenographer, and rattle off thousands of words on a typewriter, faster, almost, than people could speak their sentences.

He had taken a middle course. Of the one ambition, he retained the leather cuffs upon his shirt sleeves, and the pencil behind his ear. Of the other ambition he actually had the typewriter beside him! It could be seen that he was a fellow who would get what he wanted out of the world.

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As for the telegraph instrument, he was a master of it, and when he sat at the key, the stations that knew him and his skill never hesitated to send so fast that the ticker made a mere blur of sound, to the unpracticed ear. That was not all. He was a sender regular, brilliant, precise and clear, and never hesitating in a way that would confuse the receiver.

He was almost everything that a telegraph operator ought to be. In addition, he kept his long blond hair bright and sleek with a perfumed oil, and kept himself generally very neat. He had no bad habits, unless gum chewing could be called one. Even in this, he used discretion, decidedly, and had several brands in use at the same time.

He would start the morning with something light, such as wintergreen, and sometimes stay with this till noon. After lunch, he usually took to mint, or peppermint, which is a digestive of force. Toward the evening, he found licorice sustaining. His daily program was not always so exactly divided as this.

AT the moment when the nervous step of Mr. Lee Swain came into the room, the operator was enjoying a fresh stick of licorice. He turned with a bland smile, as Lee Swain slammed a telegraph form on top of the counter, and exclaimed:

"Why the devil can't you people get things straight, eh? Why can't you even spell out a name straight? Is that any way to deliver a telegram?"

The operator moistened a forefinger in the corner of his mouth, attached it to the telegram, and lifted the little yellow sheet of paper with the ruled lines and printed information upon it.

He glanced it over.

"I tell you how it is," he said, passing back the form, now only slightly flavored with licorice. "I tell you what—there's some of the boys, even in this job, that ain't very well-educated. The facts has gotta be faced, and them are the facts."

"You're educated, are you?" said Lee Swain.

"Two years high school," said the operator promptly.

He smiled, awaiting comment.

He got it.

"Then what d'you mean by spelling a signature like that?" Swain demanded.

The operator moistened his forefinger again, but that method of attaching and lifting the paper was too slow for Lee Swain. He grasped the sheet himself, and held it quivering with indignation and the current in the air under the nose of the youngster.

"I never wrote that," said the operator.

"You never what?"

"I never received that."

"Maybe you never did, but it's the message that you sent out," said Swain.

"No. Never. I got a memory for the messages that come through this office. You've had twenty or so, Mr. Swain. I could repeat most of 'em by heart."

"You could, eh?"

"Yes."

"And this didn't come through you, eh?" asked Swain.

"No. It did not."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

Lee Swain blinked.

"You got a message for me today—not so very long ago?" he asked.

"Yes. I got one."

"And this isn't the message?"

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"No, it certainly ain't the message."

"What message *did* you get?"

The operator shifted the chewing gum to the far side of his mouth. It was well softened, by this time, and he sank his teeth through it with a graceful and a gracious ease.

"Something about no such name being known, and advising you to recheck everything," he said.

Lee Swain caught in a breath, bit it off short, and swallowed it with a gulp.

"That's what you got?"

"Yes."

"And how was it signed?" asked Swain.

"Mayfax."

Swain shook his head, tiptoe with expectancy.

"Fairfax," said the operator, correcting himself.

"Wait a minute. Let me see the message, will you? You've got a copy, haven't you?"

"Certainly," said the other.

HE reached into a sheaf of papers, and found what he wanted, presently. Turning, in his swivel chair, to the typewriter, he rattled the message again on the sheet of paper.

This he passed across the counter to Mr. Lee Swain. The latter read, reread, then changed color and became a bright red, and then a dusty purple.

He began to tremble. The operator heard him mutter: "This ought to mean hanging! This ought to mean it."

"You've got a brain in your head!" snapped Lee Swain, aloud. "Here's something for you, boy."

He slammed on the counter a coin which the operator, with a smile, reached over and picked off. His smile faded, when he felt its weight. It was no larger than a five-cent piece, but its weight——

He opened his fingers and saw in his hand a five-dollar gold piece.

His elation was not unmixed with other emotions. He slipped a little lower in his chair, as he muttered: "Five dollars' worth of poison—for *him* to have. But who gets the dose?"

He even jumped from his chair and stepped to the door, to see Lee Swain turning the next corner at full speed!

Swain went toward a house he knew, but found his objective playing in the vacant lot adjoining.

"Come here!" yelled Swain.

The bare-legged lad detached himself from his companions and came on the run. He had made money from this employer before.

"What you do with that telegram this afternoon?" he asked.

"Gave it to you," panted the boy.

"You lie!" said Swain.

The boy took half a step back, and stared. He was of a family famous for being a little tougher than hard-tack.

"You don't mean that, mister," he decided quietly.

"You put that telegram down on the ground, somewhere on the way," said Swain.

"It was on the ground a minute, because I was knocked sidewise," said the boy. "What's the matter? don't it read just as good with a little dust on the paper?"

"What knocked you sidewise?" asked Swain.

"I just happened to run into Sam, as I came close to the Best Chance."

"Sam?" shouted Swain. "Sam, the so-called mulatto?"

"Yeah, Sam—Mrs. Jack Reynolds's man," said the youngster.

To be continued in next week's issue.

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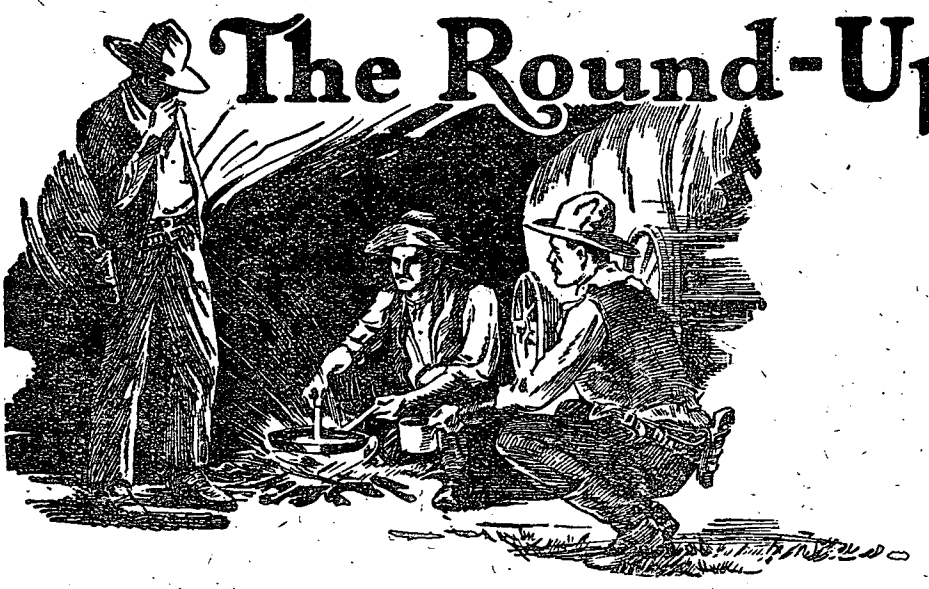
The Round-Up



FOLKS, this complete, book-length novel in Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine is being hailed by readers, new and old, as a wonderful innovation. Listen now until we tell you something about the complete, book-length novel in next week's issue.

There were three of them—two out-and-out bad men, the third was "Arizona" Jim Silver.

Steve Wycombe, ranch owner, with a reputation none too savory, hated the three men.

Dying from a bullet wound, Steve Wycombe divides his earthly possessions—real and personal—among Arizona Jim Silver and the two bad men.

Strange bequest this. Generally speaking, it is almost universally true that those who inherit do so from one who loves them. But Steve Wycombe certainly didn't love these three men. He hated them, and that's the reason he left them all that he owned. For why? Well did he know that they would fight over it, as indeed they did.

This is the unusual, thrilling, and arresting situation which you will find in the beginning of

SILVER'S STRIKE

By Max Brand

which leads next week's issue of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine.

"Silver's Strike" is a complete, book-length novel, of the length and the quality which sells to thousands of eager buyers later on, between cloth covers, for two dollars.

Here, indeed, is a true epic of the West, teeming with action, vivid with stirring pictures of that land of opportunity and adventure—the West.

Besides the stories and a fine installment of John Frederick's serial, "Gunman's Gold," we have the departments, which are such a distinguished and celebrated feature of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, "the daddy of them all," and, by far, the best of them all. Yes, everybody is ready and glad to admit that Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine is the pattern after which all imitative Western-story magazines are fashioned. No others

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have secured even a small fraction of its circulation. It continues in the lead and will retain its leadership for all time. It is the best, biggest, brighest magazine of outdoor life in the world.

Just bought a slashing good novel by that all-weather cowboy-author, Walt Coburn. This will please W. E. Rownd, Pleasant Valley, Wheeling, West Virginia, who slips into this here saddle to say what he thinks of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine.

"BOSS AND FOLKS: I read a great deal for general information—newspapers, magazines, and books—but for real pleasure, give me a good cowboy story.

"I buy every Western-story magazine as soon as it comes out, whether it is good, bad, or rotten. Some of the stories are so improbable that they don't go over big with me—schoolboy stuff—but I don't know the class of readers who buy Western stories, and maybe the publishers are giving them what they want.

"Nevertheless, I want to commend Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine for taking on Walt Coburn as one of its writers. His plots are all so varied, his stories so well-written, and the action so thrilling, that I get a great kick out of them, so much so that I am taking the time to tell you so. Thank you."

Somehow or other, we've been missin' out on the singin'. We can't tell just why, but there's an old favorite of ours entitled "The Road to Cook's Peak," and we guess any one who's laid a line over the backs of a pair of mules, gentle and meek, feels the way we do about "The Road to Cook's Peak." Let 'er go, big, strong, and hearty:

If you'll listen a while, I'll sing you a song,
And as it is short, it won't take me long.
There are some things of which I will speak
Concerning the stage on the road to Cook's Peak—
On the road to Cook's Peak,
On the road to Cook's Peak,
Concerning the stage on the road to Cook's Peak.

It was in the morning at eight forty-five;
I was hooking up all ready to drive
Out where the miners for minerals seek,
With two little mules on the road to Cook's Peak—
On the road to Cook's Peak,
On the road to Cook's Peak,
With two little mules on the road to Cook's Peak.

With my two little mules I jog along
And try to cheer them with ditty and song,
O'er the wild prairie where coyotes sneak,
While driving the stage on the road to Cook's Peak—
On the road to Cook's Peak,
On the road to Cook's Peak,
While driving the stage on the road to Cook's Peak.

Sometimes I have to haul heavy freight,
Then it is I get home very late.
In rain or shine, six days in the week,
'Tis the same little mules on the road to Cook's Peak—
On the road to Cook's Peak,
On the road to Cook's Peak,
'Tis the same little mules on the road to Cook's Peak.

And when with the driving of stage I am through,
I will to my two little mules bid adieu,
And hope that those creatures, so gentle and meek,
Will have a good friend on the road to Cook's Peak—
On the road to Cook's Peak,
On the road to Cook's Peak,
Will have a good friend on the road to Cook's Peak.

Now all kind friends that travel about,
Come take a trip on the Wallis stage route.
With a plenty of grit, they never get weak,
Those two little mules on the road to Cook's Peak—
On the road to Cook's Peak,
On the road to Cook's Peak,
Those two little mules on the road to Cook's Peak.

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The HOLLOW TREE

Miss Helen Rivers, who conducts this department, will see to it that you will be able to make friends with other readers, though thousands of miles may separate you.

If you would like a friend or friends in a certain section, write Miss Rivers to this effect, and she will put you in touch with readers who want to correspond with folks in your part of the world.

It must be understood that Miss Rivers will undertake to exchange letters only between men and men, boys and boys, women and women, girls and girls. Letters will be forwarded direct when correspondents so wish; otherwise they will be answered here. Be sure to inclose forwarding postage when sending letters through The Hollow Tree.

Address: Helen Rivers, care The Hollow Tree, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

ABOVE the Sangre de Cristo range lands is the Park country of central Colorado. "Como Cal, of Colorado," can tell you folks about placer-gold grounds in Park County.

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a young mining engineer and have one hundred acres of good mining property in Park County, Colorado. I am sinking a shaft on this property at the foot of an ancient waterfall, and have found placer gold in every pan, from the top of the ground to the bottom of the shaft, which is twenty-two feet deep now. I need a pard to help me work this property. I want a pard who will not be a quitter and who will have the staying qualities to push this proposition to a prosperous finish. Yes, one who can at least hold up his end of the grubstake until we dig to bed rock.

There is a new cabin on the property completely furnished, and mining tools are on the ground ready for work!

Como Cal, of Colorado.

Care of The Tree.

Here's another new member, folks.

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a boy of nineteen, and in search of Pals from the West. I've traveled in all the Eastern States and lived in North Carolina for three years. If any of you hombres are interested in aviation, I can tell you plenty about that, for my dad was a pilot in the late War. I will also exchange snapshots.

So come on, you Arizona, New Mexico, Montana, Wyoming, Texas, and Utah cowboys—drop me a line and I'll answer pronto.

B. Shuster.

1409 Winter Street,
Fort Wayne, Indiana.

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A Michiganer is wanting you to speak up, folks.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am one of those restless souls who are forever seeking that elusive something which always lies beyond the horizon. At thirty I have seen a great part of this old world. And now, after three months in one place, I find myself getting restless and lonesome. I would like to hear from Hollow Tree members everywhere. I promise to answer all letters promptly, and, who knows, perhaps on the way to China, Australia, or Alaska I may meet some of you in person and say, "Hello, friend."

CARL EDWARDS.
1800 Ferry Park Avenue, West,
Detroit, Michigan.

From South Carolina come two new Pen Pals for you, girls.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

We are two girls looking for Pen Pals from everywhere. Eulalain is twenty-three of age, and Beulah is twenty-two. We will answer all letters, so, everybody, come on. We'll exchange snaps, too.

EULALAIN VICK, BEULAH RUSHING.
Lancaster, South Carolina.

This Utah girl wants to yarn with you-all.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

May I come in? I'm so lonesome. I would like to hear from folks everywhere. I was born and raised in the good old South, and I love the wide open spaces, especially what my city friends call the "sticks."

MARJORIE, OF SALT LAKE.
Care of The Tree.

Here's the daughter of a sheepman to yarn with you folks.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a young girl of nineteen, and I live on a farm. I love outdoor sports of all kinds. I have a horse of my own, and I spend many happy hours riding. Yes, we have plenty of elbowroom here for horseback riding.

My father is a sheepman, and I can tell a little of that lonely life. So come on, Pals, and let me hear from you-all. I will answer all letters.

NELLIE ATWOOD.
Vernal, Utah.

A Virginia miss is looking for a sack of mail, folks.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a girl of sixteen and live on a small farm. I would love to have Pen Pals from all over the United States and foreign countries. I would be glad to exchange view cards and snapshots, too. I prefer ages from fifteen to twenty-one.

FRANCES HACKETT.
R. F. D. 1, Box 247,
Roanoke, Virginia.

Como Cal, of Colorado can tell you folks about the placer-gold country in Park County of central Colorado. Wear your friend-maker membership badges, folks, when you speak up to this Colorado prospector.

Twenty-five cents in coin or stamps sent to The Hollow Tree Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring you either the pin style or the button for the coat lapel. In ordering, be sure to state which you wish.

From the New England States comes this junior member.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I'm a boy of fifteen, living in Massachusetts and I would like to hear from other boys from anywhere.

CHARLES RIPLEY.
15 Chelmsford Street,
Methuen, Massachusetts.

You-all speak right up to this Canadian boy.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a lonesome farm boy, and I would like to have a few Pen Pals from the South. I have traveled around the world a little and still have some of the wanderlust fever left. Well, I am sure waiting for some letters. I would like to exchange snaps, too. I am nineteen.

A. G. FALLER.
R. R. 2, Wellandport,
Ontario, Canada.

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Violet is a London girl looking for some friends from this side of the water.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I wish The Hollow Tree would get me some Pen Pals. I do not mind who they are or where they come from. I guarantee an answer to every letter I receive. I am not hard to please. I am interested in music and in all outdoor sports. I should like to hear from a cowgirl or somebody right out West. So will The Hollow Tree go ahead and see what it can do for me, please? I will take an interest in anything anybody chooses to write about. I am eighteen.

VIOLET BEBBINGTON.
9 Thorneyhedge Road, Chiswick,
W. 4, London, England.

Here is a junior member who can tell you young folks about Washington.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I am a young boy of fifteen years. I live on a small ranch of nine thousand acres. Some folks think the State of Washington hasn't any cattle, but it has. I can tell you folks a lot about the ranches and about the State of Washington, too. Washington leads in timber and apple production in the United States.

I want correspondence from South America and every foreign country. And some of you lonely soldiers, write. I'll answer all letters.

DESERT KID, OF WASHINGTON.
Care of The Tree.

A hombre from New Mexico will yarn with you folks from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I've been in New Mexico for some time now, and I sure like it here. This country is full of interest—old Indian legends and the like. I am well acquainted with some of the best of the Indians in this territory—silversmiths and artists—and will tell about these folks to whoever is interested.

I took a fine trip last summer all through Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah. Got in some fine fishing and took some good photos. This coming summer I want to go into Minnesota and Wisconsin, possibly taking in some of northern Michigan. I want to fish where it is possible to camp near the streams, as I don't carry a boat with me. And I don't want to go near resorts if it is possible to stay away from them. I'd rather listen to the bells of a dozen horses than to hear the neighbors talking into the late hours of the night! So I sure will appreciate it if the old Holla will put me in touch with some folks in these territories so that I can compare notes on where to go. I am beginning to feel like some of the old-timers—I hate to be in the middle of a crowd. I would much rather be camped somewhere alone.

Well, folks, I hope you will be interested enough to give me a yarn in return for what I can tell you about New Mexico. There is plenty to tell about the country here. Fishing is fine. Hunting, too. I've been to the Elephant Butte country, folks, so you see I, too, have something interesting to talk about. BRYANT F. MEARS.
622 San Francisco Street,
Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Here's a Vermont miss ready to yarn with you-all.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I live in the East, in a small town in southern Vermont. I have been studying photography for some time, and have found it very interesting. We have wonderful scenery in our vicinity, and many historic spots which afford an excellent opportunity for snaps, although I am interested in studio work as well. I would appreciate hearing from any one interested in photography, and will also exchange views from this part of the country.

MISS A. L. R.
Box 43, Pownal, Vermont.

This hombre is aiming to change his stomping ground.

DEAR MISS RIVERS:

I would like to hear from Westerners in general and from prospectors in particular. I expect to go West this year, and the more information I get, the easier it will be for me to know where to go. I intend to do some prospecting for a while and then settle down out West. I've traveled over most of the States of Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan. So come on and write, folks. I'll answer every letter.

WALTER OPASIK.
2742 Augusta Street,
Chicago, Illinois.

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WHERE TO GO and How to GET THERE

By JOHN NORTH

We aim in this department to give practical help to readers. The service offered includes accurate information about the West, its ranches, mines, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. We will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to us, for we are always glad to assist you to the best of our ability.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WESTERN trails, leading away from civilization to the freedom of the wilderness, have a mighty strong lure these pleasant spring days. In fact there are so many of these attractive highways beckoning to the man with a vagabond spirit that it is hard to know which to follow. Larry M., of Portland, Oregon, has made his choice, and is now asking for information about the trail he selected.

"I'm a transplanted Easterner, Mr. North, having come from Portland, Maine, to Portland, Oregon, during this past year. But even if I haven't lived out here very long, I'm mighty keen about this northwestern country. This summer I'm going to do a little exploring, together with my sixteen-year-old son, who is a chip of the old block when it comes to roughing it. We are particularly interested in making the Oregon Sky-line Trail trip, and

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are wondering if you can give us the necessary information about it?"

We'll do our level best. The Oregon Sky-line Trail follows the summits of the Oregon Cascades from Mount Hood to Crater Lake, a distance of some two hundred and fifty miles. Larry will find the present route a combination of rough mountain trail and road, constructed at different times by forest rangers, stockmen, miners, trappers, and Indians.

Only the hombre familiar with rough mountain travel and able to take care of himself under conditions of physical hardship should undertake this trip without the services of a guide. The experienced mountain traveler, however, will find much sport in following this route, for it offers fine fishing, thrilling mountain climbing, and jolly camping to the initiated.

There are about two hundred and fifty lakes scattered along or close to the main trail, varying in area from a city block to several square miles. Larry will find the largest lakes and the most numerous along the south half of the trail, several of them being accessible by auto over fairly good mountain roads. The larger lakes have excellent fishing, and many of the smaller lakes are teeming with trout. Boats are available at Suttle, Elk, Crescent, and Diamond Lakes, but rafts may be necessary on other lakes.

The mountain climber on the Oregon Sky-line Trail has as much sport in store for him as the angler, for not counting the Crater Lake National Park peaks or Mount Hood, there are six major peaks along the route. Most of these are not difficult to scale if plenty of time is allowed. As nights in this mountain country are cold, Larry and his son will need warm clothes.

The Sky-line Trail in its entirety is fairly good and easy to follow. To keep one from going astray, there are frequent signs except in long stretches of good plain road or trail where such signs may be half a mile apart. The country is of such conformation that traveling is not especially difficult, even if off the trail. A saddle animal may be used almost anywhere in the country close to the route, although bushy areas should be avoided.

The ends of the route are Crater Lake National Park and the Mount Hood Loop Road. A few hours' trip by auto will take a party from Portland, Hood River, or The Dalles to the north end of the trail, or from Klamath Falls to the south end. Intermediate points on the trail may be reached by auto from Eugene or from Bend or Redmond. The McKenzie Highway bisects the trail. Fairly good auto roads from Bend join the Sky-line Trail at Elk, Odell, and Crescent Lakes, and give access to considerable portions of the trail in the lake country.

We advise Larry to be sure to

SPECIAL NOTICE

HINTS TO HIKERS

"Travel Slowly. Rest often." These are two rules which should be observed by all hikers and mountain climbers. Another important item is the manner in which equipment should be carried. For back packing in the woods there are four standard devices, about which this department will furnish information upon request. Address your letter of inquiry to John North in care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine.

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take an accurate map of this trail along with him, and are telling him by letter where such a map may be obtained free. If any other readers are contemplating this trip, we'll be glad to send them this same address.

Another hombre bound for the Beaver State is Wilfred N., of Peoria, Illinois.

"I'm interested in the town of Redmond out in Oregon, Mr. North, and would like any information you can give me about it. My idea is to settle in a smallish town as I am sick of city life, and Redmond sounds pretty good from what I've heard of it. My present plan is to drive out to Oregon early this summer. I shall take camping equipment along and not only camp along the route, thus saving hotel bills, but camp also in or near Redmond when I get there. I've been told that this town is located in the midst of a wonderful vacation land and am interested in that, as I love the outdoors. Any facts you can give me will be welcome."

From all accounts which have come our way, we'd say that Redmond is a pretty good bet. This town, which has a population of twelve hundred, is situated in the center of the agricultural country of central Oregon. It is also located at the crossing of two national highways. The Dalles-California north and south; the Eugene-Redmond, west, and the Redmond-Ochoco, east. Redmond is served by two railroads, the Oregon Trunk, owned by the Great Northern, and the Northern Pacific, and a branch of the Union Pacific.

This small but growing Western town is the market place for the major part of the farm products of central Oregon. In its vicinity dairying, poultry raising, and wool growing are carried on. Many carloads of potatoes and clover seed are shipped from Redmond annually. The farm lands, which have ample irrigation water, are composed of volcanic ash impregnated with silt loam and are easily worked at any time of the year. There are no extremes in temperature, and the climate is dry and healthful.

As a lover of outdoor life Wilfred will find Redmond a most satisfactory place, for it is the gateway to some of the greatest playgrounds in the entire West. Within twenty-two miles of this Oregon town one may enter the famous Three Sisters area which includes true grandeur in the form of vast flower fields, glaciers, waterfalls, lakes, streams, and mountain peaks.

Wilfred will find many inviting spots to make camp within a short drive of Redmond. There by the side of a quiet, flower-bordered stream he may camp in great comfort and pleasure. A stone's throw away flows fine cold drinking water, and he may catch the trout for his evening meal almost at the door of his tent.

If Wilfred wants to get in a bit of mountain climbing, there are plenty of peaks in the vicinity just waiting for him to scale their summits.

It would require more space than we have at our disposal to give Wilfred all the information he should have about this thriving little Western town, so we are referring him to a reliable source for additional facts and shall be glad to do the same for any other readers of this magazine who are interested in hearing more about Redmond.

MOUNTAIN goats are classed as the rarest and wildest of Rocky Mountain game.

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GUNS AND GUNNERS

By CHARLES E. CHAPEL

Lieutenant, U. S. Marine Corps

The foremost authorities on ballistics and the principal firearms manufacturers are coöperating to make this department a success. We shall be glad to answer your questions regarding firearms of any make or age. Address your letters to Lieutenant Charles E. Chapel, care of Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

TRAJECTORY is the path of the bullet in its flight from the gun to the target. It is not a straight line because gravity pulls the bullet downward as fast as though it were dropped from a tenth-story window. Since the bullet is moving forward at the same time it is dropping, its path becomes a curve. This curve rises above the line of sight and causes us to raise our rear sight to give the barrel the necessary elevation for each range.

If the curve rises too high above our line of sight, we shall miss the target in case we overestimate the distance from muzzle to target, but a bullet with a comparatively flat trajectory will travel so close to our line of sight that it will hit targets that are either under or over the estimated range.

Now for some answers to readers' questions.

Caliber designations.

D. W. STRATHERN, Ouachita, Arkansas: We are glad to explain caliber designation again; it is the subject of much discussion among our firearm fans. Generally, .25-20-120 would mean a cartridge with a caliber .25 bullet, with a powder charge of 20 grains, and a bullet weight of 120 grains. However, there are many exceptions to this rule. Thus, .30-06 means caliber .30, Model of 1906, in referring to ammunition for the Springfield Rifle. Also, there is considerable variation among manufacturers, all of whom may call a

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bullet caliber .30 but actually make it caliber .29, or caliber .31, according to their fancy.

Bluing solution.

P. A. CARROTHERS, Orange, California: There are many commercial gun-bluing preparations which are not much more than shellac or lacquer which comes off in the field. There are various heat treatments, which we shall describe in later issues, but in response to frequent reader request, we offer the following formula, without guaranteeing the results. This preparation ought to be successful, but frequent coatings are necessary.

Aqua Distillate (distilled water)	500
Bichloride of Mercury	30
Potassium Chlorate	30
Potassium Nitrate	30
Spirits of Nitre	305

Have this filled by a druggist and tell him that the quantities are in cubic centimeters for fluids, and grams for ounces. This formula will make more than a pint. You can cut down all quantities equally, if you wish. Apply with a brush, one coat at a time, until you have the desired shade on your gun barrel. To be safe, try it on a small area first.

Largest cartridges.

T. F. BENSON, Elkridge, Maryland: The .50 Eley, for English trade in Africa and India, is one of the largest cartridges, being known as an elephant-gun cartridge. The Model 1886 Winchester uses a .50-110-300 cartridge and the .50-100-450, but the Winchester High Velocity .50-110-300 is probably the largest American cartridge.

To extract a ruptured cartridge case.

O. E. WESSON, Utica, New York: To extract a ruptured cartridge case from a rifle barrel, a device known as a "ruptured cartridge case extractor" should be used, but the same results can usually be secured by moistening the bullet of a fresh cartridge, rubbing it in sand, loading it into the chamber, and then unloading. The bullet enters the ruptured case of the preceding cartridge and when it is withdrawn, brings the torn case with it.

Flintlock range.

R. A. HARMS, Indianapolis, Indiana: The flintlock effective range was considered less than two hundred yards, although there are many records of hits at greater ranges.

Firearms clews in criminal cases.

THOMAS H. GOWAN, St. Louis, Missouri: Some of the clews are the scratches on the bullets from the murder gun; marks of the extractor, ejector, and firing pin on automatic pistol cartridge cases; and powder residue in the barrel. Even if the serial numbers have been filed off by the criminal, the police can apply a certain chemical preparation and temporarily restore the gun numbers. This process is closely guarded, but we shall be glad to explain it to readers who write on their official letterheads and properly identify themselves as law-enforcement officers.

Government supplies of Krags and Russians are exhausted, but the U. S. Rifle, Model 1917, caliber .30, is sold for $7.50, plus shipping charges, under certain restrictions which will be explained to readers upon request.

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MISSING

This department is offered free of charge to our readers. Its purpose is to aid them in getting in touch with persons of whom they have lost track.

While it will be better to use your name in the notice, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

Now, readers, help those whose friends or relatives are missing, as you would like to be helped if you were in a similar position.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to any one who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

ATTENTION.—I am a natural-born American, but cannot prove it, as I cannot trace my real parents since I do not know their names. In January 21, 1898, I was adopted by Catherine and Austin Ambrose from an institution in West Hoboken, New Jersey, but do not know the name of the institution. The family who adopted me would never tell me anything concerning my real parents. Years ago they left me to fight my own battles, and I have no idea where they are now. Though I have passed the examinations entitling me to a higher grade in the British navy, were I am a wireless operator, I cannot be promoted without my birth certificate. If any of the readers happen to know of any one who may have placed a son in an orphanage in West Hoboken, New Jersey, on the date mentioned, please write to F. A., care of this magazine.

BLANCHARD, FREEMAN.—Was last heard from in Vermont a number of years ago. If living, would be more than eighty years of age. Several fingers are missing from one hand. Any information regarding him, whether living or dead, would be gratefully received by Floyd Blanchard, Salem, Nebraska.

CALLAHAN, IRENE and **LOULA.**—Daughters of Clark C. Callahan. Any one knowing their present address, please inform Miss Betty Meek, 5331 Buchanan Street, Los Angeles, California, who has important information for them.

McARTOR, JESSIE.—Please let us hear from you. We want you to come home. The children need you. Luella McArtor, Lawrenceburg, Tennessee.

PANCO, MARICH MICHAEL.—He is twenty-four years old and was last seen on May 25, 1932. Sister Ann would like to know his whereabouts. Please write or go home. All is forgiven. Any news concerning him would be deeply appreciated by his sister, Ann M. Panco, 2630 West Eleventh Street, Cleveland, Ohio.

HOVER or **FRAZIER, ASA** or **WALTER.**—He is fifty years old and a World War veteran. Was last heard from in Carlton, Michigan, in 1925. He is six feet tall, has dark hair and blue eyes. His mother would be grateful for any news of her son. She is Mrs. Phoebe J. Frazier, 644 Fifth Avenue, North Troy, New York.

STATIC.—Times are quiet. Remember Westward Passage? We are home now. Always Beetle.

ALEXANDER, MRS.—She has five sons and two daughters. The sons are Harry, James, Walter, Buddy, and Elmer. Both the daughters are married. When last heard from Mrs. Alexander lived at 553 Vermont Street, Gary, Indiana. Previous to living in Gary, she resided in Tefft, Indiana. Any word from any member of the family would be appreciated by old friends. Write to K. B. B. and J. B., care of this magazine.

SMITH, MRS. MAGGIE.—Who has two grown daughters, Stella and Winnie. They were last heard from in Memphis, Tennessee. Had formerly lived in Hot Springs and Fort Smith, Arkansas. Mrs. Smith is a nurse. A daughter of her sister-in-law, Lillie Gilliam, wishes to hear from her. Mrs. Smith's maiden name is thought to have been Stratton. Lillie, Ben, and ma are all dead. Any information concerning the Smiths will be thankfully received by Lillian Gilliam Gray, Box 231, Seymour, Texas.

NOTICE.—I would like to hear from an old friend, Lloyd Gibson, who can give me some information which is very important to me. He was last heard from at East Des Moines, Iowa. Letters sent to that address have all been returned. He is sixteen years old, five feet four inches tall, and has blue eyes and light-brown hair. Any one knowing his whereabouts, kindly notify Pauline C. Armstrong, care of Mrs. Martha Lewis, Stanberry, Missouri.

LEDBETTER, GUS.—He is my father, and I want to find him. Was last heard from about twenty years ago. At that time he was in Vigo Park, Texas. My mother and father were separated because of some trouble over some children my mother had by a former marriage. I never remember seeing my father and would be thankful if any of the readers could help me locate him. Address E. Ledbetter, General Delivery, Bennington, Oklahoma.

STACKS, CALVIN GILBERT.—Last heard of in Oklahoma. Has black hair and brown eyes. Is about six feet tall and weighs between one hundred and eighty-five and two hundred pounds. Has a jolly disposition and is good company. Always the life of the crowd. Any one knowing his present address, please write to his sister, Rosa A. Slacker Bain, Lacoochee, Florida.

FOSTER, ELBERT ELRIC.—About seven years ago he was heard from in St. Paul Minnesota. Since that time he seems to have disappeared. He is now twenty-nine years of age. Any one having any news concerning him, please communicate with his sister, Eva Mae Foster, R. F. D. 2, Hillsdale, Michigan.

FOSTER, LEATHA LEONE.—She was adopted when she was about three years old. At the present time she is twenty-five. Please write or come to see me. If any of the readers know her, will they kindly inform me of her whereabouts? Eva Mae Foster, R. F. D. 2, Hillsdale, Michigan.

GRIFFTH, DENNY.—On November 15, 1932, he was discharged from a training camp at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and has not been heard from since. Any news will be gladly received from him or any one knowing anything concerning him. Write to his wife, Mrs. Rae Griffth, Copper Valley, Virginia.

PAUL, JOSEPH D.—He is between sixty and sixty-two years of age and it is more than forty years since his sister last saw him. He left home when he was seventeen years old and took up work as a woodsman. If he is still living and sees this, or if not, and he married and had any children who may survive him, will they please get in touch with his sister, Mrs. James Prosper, 45 Brunswick Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

HINSHAW, DORIAN.—He was a contractor in Great Falls, Montana, until 1918. In August of that year he left there. Later we heard that he was with a construction company in Texas. He is about fifty-eight years old, five feet nine inches tall, weighs one hundred and fifty-eight pounds, and has dark-brown eyes and gray hair. His mother, wife, and children all miss him. Kindly send any information to M. Carlson, care of this magazine.

D.—Kindly write to me. Have something important to tell you. Remember—quack, quack, four o'clock! Remember, you said that you would be back in two months, and it is now nearly five. So please write to your Babe. She is at the same old address.

AUSTIN, EVA.—While taking flying lessons in 1928, she lived in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. Have lost her address and would appreciate hearing from any one who can give me news of her. Address Carl Vincent Anderson, Seventh Division, U. S. S. "Dobbin," San Diego, California.

HIGGINS, DONALD J.—He is fifty-four years old, five feet five inches tall, and has hazel eyes. In 1932 he was working as a waiter in Los Angeles, California. Any one having any information concerning him, kindly write to his daughter, Mrs. Floyd Javine, R. 1, care of Jim Halford, Barnsdall, Oklahoma.

KELLER, JAKE.—When last heard from he was supposed to be on his way to Texas. Please write to your brother, John Keller, R. R. 6, Box 158, Davenport, Iowa.

CLARK, EDMUND.—Have you forgotten all the plans that we once made? Please give me a chance to explain. Write Ann, in care of this magazine, or at the old address.

WELCH, HARRY C.—Will he please write to his son, Lester, who has never seen him and wants very much to know his father? When last heard of, he was in St. Louis, Missouri. Any information as to his present address will be deeply appreciated by Lester C. Welch Short, R. 1, Box 3, Bear Lake, Michigan.

NOTICE.—I am a girl of eighteen, and I am trying to find my mother, whom I have never seen. My name is Marion Iverna West. I was born February 9, 1915, in District 385, Ohio. My father was Wilbur George West. My mother's name was Elizabeth Jane White. Their residence, as given on my birth certificate, was 1494 Ketchum Avenue, Toledo, Ohio. I was adopted twice; the first time when only a few days old. I have never been able to determine the date of the second adoption. Any one who may have known my parents, please write to Marion I. West, care of C. E. Van Pulton, 1515 Plainfield Avenue, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

CLARK, WILLIAM.—Was employed by the Marvel Underwear Co., of New London, Connecticut, in 1930. His home is in or near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Will, won't you please write to me? There is something of importance you should know. M., North Stonington Road, Westerly, Rhode Island.

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WESTON, SADIE GORDON.—In 1893 Sadie Gordon worked in St. Catherine's Hall, Augusta, Maine, with her mother and sister. Later she married Frank Weston, who worked in the "Kennebeck Journal" office with me. Do you remember how I lost my pocketbook when leaving the office one day? And do you remember the Sunday that you visited me at my home in Waterville, Maine? If she, or any one who knows her, sees this notice, will they be so kind as to write to A., care of this magazine?

FLANAGAN, JACK.—He was last heard from when working at an oil well in Greyhorse, Oklahoma. At that time he roomed at the Smith Williams Hotel, in Fairfax, Oklahoma. Any one having information as to his present address, kindly write to Ruth Smith Johnston, R. 4, Mountain View, Oklahoma.

HARRISON, CHARLES B.—When last heard from, he was living on the east side of Chicago, Illinois. Dear Charles, please write to me. I want to hear from you so much. Lucille. Any one knowing the whereabouts of this man, please inform Mrs. Lucille Harrison, 218 East Morris Street, Indianapolis, Indiana.

MAHAN, MRS. HELEN DUDLEY.—Please write to your sister immediately. Mother has been in the hospital four weeks. Home now and feeling better, but worries terribly about you, as we all do. Won't you just let us know that you are still alive. I won't say anything to any one that you don't want me to. Dorothy.

BARSTOW, LOUIS.—He is supposed to have moved to Ohio in 1931. If you remember me, write to Estelle Magu, R. 9, Box 278, San Antonio, Texas.

LE ROY, RICHARD.—Who was stationed at Fort Jay, New York, in 1932. He was in First M. T. C. Do you remember me? If you do, write to Estelle Magu, R. 9, Box 278, San Antonio, Texas.

MARTINEAU, RAYMOND.—He is twenty-one years old and American born. On May 3, 1932, he left his mother's home in Montreal, Canada. The last letter came from him December 5th from Houston, Texas. None of the letters sent to him from his home ever reached him. He is six feet tall, with blue eyes and blond hair. His mother is much worried as to what may have happened and is asking your aid in locating her son. Kindly send any news to Mother, care of Western Story Magazine.

McDONNELL, ANN.—She is my mother, and I would be happy if I could find her or any other relatives. When I was about four years old I was placed in the New York Home for Foundlings. Any information concerning myself or relatives would be much appreciated. Address Kenneth Joseph McDonnell, 331 North Johnson Street, South Bend, Indiana.

THOMPSON or DANDO, GEORGE CLARK.—Last heard of in Wolf Point, Montana. Your sister would like to get in touch with you immediately. Write to Alice, care of this magazine.

THOMPSON, ALBERT.—Last heard from September 10, 1892. At that time he was in Denver, Colorado. In his youth his home was in New York City. There were some relatives of the family living in New Jersey. Kindly send any information to Alice, care of this magazine.

LUND, JAMES EARL.—He left home on June 30, 1930, when he was fourteen years old. A letter came from him on Mother's Day, 1931. He was at that time in La Salle, Illinois. Since then nothing has been heard from him. He is six feet tall, weighs one hundred and sixty pounds, and has brown hair and eyes. His teeth are conspicuously beautiful. On one side of chin is a small brown mole. When he left was wearing class signet ring, marked J. E. L., 1929. Likes garage and filler-station work. Great reader of Western stories. His father is in poor health and his mother is very anxious to hear from him. Please send any word concerning him to Lund & Sons Service, Brockton, Montana.

DE AVONSHIRE, EARL CLINTON.—He is my father, and he disappeared in March, 1918. When last seen he was in Toledo, Ohio. Jacksonville, Ohio, was his birthplace. He was born there in either 1871 or 1872. It is possible that he may use any of the following names: E. C. De Avonshire, De Avon or Devonshire. He is six feet one inch tall. Average weight is 235 to 250 pounds. Hair is black streaked with gray. Eyes are very dark-brown. Has typical English fair complexion. On left side of face is a knife scar, jagged and wider at one end. Chin is deeply cleft. Manner and bearing is decidedly aristocratic. Belongs to both the Masons and Elks. He is a mining engineer with talent for law. It is very important that I get in touch with him, or, if he is no longer living, will any one who may have seen him on March, 1918, or later, kindly address Mrs. Russell Craine, 620 First Avenue North, Forest Grove, Oregon.

MARTIN, W. J.—Generally known as Bill. In 1925 he was in Sherman, Texas. Since then he seems to have disappeared. He is my father. His brothers are John, Richard, Tom, Walter, and Luther. He has three sisters, Pearl, Bernice, and Berta. The aforementioned are my uncles and aunts. If any of them see this notice, will they please get in touch with me? Or if any of the readers can offer any information, it will be gratefully received. Address Mrs. Ellen Hardesty, Box 1114, Las Vegas, Nevada.

BIUS, A. R.—Albert, please let me hear from you. Baby needs your help. Remember I promised that you could help educate her. Have tried for more than two years to find you, but all my letters have been returned. The last address I have for you is Vicksburg, Mississippi, care of Phoenix Utility Co. I know you cannot have forgotten the sixteen-year-old girl of Crawfordsville, Arkansas, eight years ago last September. You told me that if I ever needed anything I was to let you know. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please write to Dolly, care of this magazine.

SWANN, FLOSSIE.—Also known as Florence Curtis. She was born in Kentucky. Her parents were named Reynolds. Her mother's given name was Julia. Flo is a brunette about twenty-seven years of age. She is five feet seven inches tall and weighs one hundred and twenty-five pounds. Her eyes are blue. Her friends call her "Dude" and "Teeney." She has a baby girl named Gloria. Was divorced from Robert Swann (Slim), November, 1927, in Dallas, Texas. Has three sisters, Louise, Trixie, and Elizabeth, and three brothers, John, Mack, and Berkeley. She was last seen on the night of January 1, 1933, in the D. D. Drug Store, 1215 South Akard Street, Dallas. It is possible that she is in Houston, Texas; St. Louis, Missouri; or Chicago, Illinois. Has worked in leading hotels in those cities. Named a P. B. X. operator. Please send any information to Lone Star, care of this magazine.

MORGAN, RAY J.—Please come back. I know now that I was wrong. I love you and believe in you. Marge.

MILLAN, MRS. ANNA.—She is my mother, and she left northern Washington sixteen years ago. She is tall and inclined to be stout. Has dark eyes and hair. Do any of the readers know where she is? If so, please communicate with Buster, care of this magazine.

CROSS, GEORGE.—In 1928 he was in Detroit, Michigan. He is twenty-one, five feet eleven inches tall, blond, and blue-eyed. Was born in Sparta, Wisconsin. Please send any news to Clarence E. Cross, care of this magazine.

CROSS, NELLIE.—Was born in Sparta, Wisconsin, and was living there in 1929. She is sixteen years old. Is five feet four inches tall, and is blond with blue eyes. Any information appreciated by Clarence E. Cross, care of this magazine.

BOWMAN, THOMAS.—Want to get in touch with his descendants. He married Margaret Stout and they lived in Perry, Ohio. Margaret was born in Bedford County, Pennsylvania, November 24, 1805. The Bowman children are thought to have moved to Illinois and Kansas. Please address any information to K. C. Barker, Oblong, Illinois.

LISTON, JOSEPH.—Want to hear from any of his dedescendants. He married Barbara Strait and later went West from Athens County, Ohio, in 1868. They had four children at this time. One of the girls was Sarah June Liston. Would be glad to hear from any one named Strait or Straight. Address H. C. Barker, Oblong, Illinois.

MILLAN, MRS. ANNA.—Mother, if you are well and happy, let me know. Don't want to open old wounds, but have wanted you badly ever since you left us. Please write to me, dear. Ruth has two babies now. Write to Buster, care of this magazine.

MILLER, RALPH, EVERT, LYNDALL, and HARRY EDWIN.—Ten years ago they were adopted from an orphans' home in Peoria, Illinois. At the present time they would be twenty, eighteen, sixteen, and eleven years old, respectively. Their mother died two years ago, and I am very anxious to get in touch with them. Ralph and Evert were adopted by the same family. Any news of them will be appreciated by their brother. Address Walt, care of Western Story Magazine.

ATTENTION.—Would like to hear from the people who advertised about two years ago for Johanna Nepher, who came from the old country in the early days. I am one of her heirs. Address G. H. Armstrong, Dayton, Texas.

PENNICK, VIOLET.—I am so worried about you. Please write to Mother, in care of this magazine.

KNAUCK, REMIL.—He is my cousin and has been missing since 1881. Any news will be appreciated. Adolph Shmuker, R. 1, Box 258, Pewaukee, Wisconsin.

SADOWY, STEPHEN.—Whose last known address was San Francisco, California. A nephew is anxious to locate him. If you can help him, please communicate with Alex, care of this magazine.

WRIGHT, JOSEPH A.—Won't some one please help me find him? He is my father. My mother's name is Nellie. My parents were living in Mankato, Kansas, with the Reverend Harrison and family, when I was born in December, 1838. When I was about a year old my father left us. I have longed to be with him or know him. My name was Cora Luella Wright before I was married. Any one knowing anything concerning his present whereabouts, please write to Mrs. C. L. Fields, R. 3, Box 24, Longview, Texas.

HARRIS, FRANK, JR.—His home was in Richmond, Alabama, and he served in the Philippine Islands during the Spanish-American War. Any one knowing his whereabouts, please write to his daughter, Mrs. W. A. Johnson, Box 25, Pike Road, Alabama.

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Electric Telegraph Set 15c

BOYS! A private Electric Telegraph Set of your own for **15c.** Lots of fun sending messages to your friends. Better still get two sets, hook them up as shown in the directions, for TWO-WAY MESSAGES (sending and receiving). No trouble at all to operate with the simple instructions that accompany each set. Operates on any standard dry-battery obtainable everywhere. With this outfit you can learn to transmit and receive messages by the Morse International Code, and in a very short time become an expert operator. Mounted on wooden base measuring 4 x 3 in., first class construction throughout, complete with key, sounder, magnet, miniature Western Union blanks, packed in neat box with full illustrated instructions. **ALL FOR 15c** (without battery). **postpaid.** (*Canada and Foreign 20c.*)

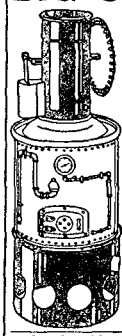
Add *10c* for 64 page book **"BOY ELECTRICIAN".** Tells how to make batteries, dynamos, motors, radios bells, engines, alarms, coils, etc. Written specially for boys so anyone can understand it. 100 illustrations. **ONLY 10c.**

770 page catalog of novelties, jokes, tricks, puzzles, etc., 10c.

BIG STEAM ENGINE

NEW POWERFUL MODEL JUST OUT

25c **Add 10c for postage and packing**



The world's biggest value in mechanical toys. A great big steam engine, measuring 7 inches in height by 2½ inches in diameter (7½ inches in circumference) for **ONLY 25 cents.** You should see it run, too. It's a revelation to see the fly wheel spin around at a great rate as soon as you "get steam up." Just light up, fill the boiler with water, and in a few minutes the engine is running at top speed. New model just out, runs on alcohol or canned heat—MORE POWER. Has fly wheel for running small mechanical toys.

Fully Tested—Guaranteed to Run

It is foolproof, harmless, fully tested and guaranteed to run. A scientific toy that illustrates the principle of the steam turbine. Runs for hours on one filling of water. Every boy should have one. Wonderfully well made—splendid value for the money. Sells for ONLY 25c., with 10c extra for postage and packing. Easily worth double.

MAKE YOUR OWN RADIO RECEIVING SET

Enjoy the concerts, baseball games, market reports, latest news, etc. This copyrighted book "EFFICIENT RADIO SETS" shows how to make and operate inexpensive Radio Sets, the materials for which can be purchased for a mere trifle. Also tells how to build a short-wave Receiver for bringing in foreign stations, police calls, ships at sea, etc. **ONLY 15c. postpaid.**

SILENT DEFENDER

Used by police officers, detectives, sheriffs, night watchmen and others as a means of self-protection. Very effective. Easily fits the hand, the fingers being grasped in the four holes. Very useful in an emergency. Made of aluminum they are very light, weighing less than 2 ounces. Handy pocket size always ready for instant use. **PRICE 25c each, 2 for 45c postpaid.**

JAPANESE ROSE BUSHES

The Wonder of the World

10 cts.

Japanese Rose Bushes **bloom all the year round.** Just think of it. Six weeks after planting the seed, the plants will be in **full bloom.** It may not seem possible, but we positively **guarantee it to be so.** They will **bloom every ten weeks.** Summer or Winter, and when three years old the bush will be a **mass of roses,** bearing from five hundred to a thousand roses on each bush. The flowers are in three shades—white, pink, and crimson. The plants will do well both in and out doors. Price 10c, packet, 3 pkts. for 25c postpd.

Little Wonder Crystal Radio Receiver $1

Say what you will about Electrical and Battery Sets, a CRYSTAL set has them all beat for simplicity and clearness of tone. There is absolutely no noise and no distortion—no batteries to buy—no tubes to wear out—no maintenance expense whatsoever. Cost nothing to operate and will last indefinitely. Reception is loud and clear. This Receiver is guaranteed to work equal to the most expensive Crystal Set you can buy. Has a receiving radius of over 25 miles, or under favorable conditions up to 100 miles. Constructed of the finest materials throughout, including supersensitive crystal, insuring quick results. PRICE of Receiver only **$1.00 postpaid.** Or complete with Ear Phone and Aerial Kit—everything all complete—nothing more to buy. **$2.95 postpaid. Johnson Smith & Co., Dept. 936 Racine, Wis.**

BIG ENTERTAINER

180 Jokes and Riddles, 34 Magic Tricks, 54 Parlor Games, 75 Toasts, 15 Tricks with Cards, 50 Money-making Secrets, 10 Funny Readings, 3 Monologues, 21 Puzzles and Problems, 5 Comic Recitations, Cut-outs for Checkers and Chess, Dominoes, Fox and Geese, 9 Men Morris, Spanish Person Puzzle, Game of Anagrams, etc. **All for 15c postpaid.**

THE REMARKABLE FIREFLY PLANT

A Vine that Blooms at Night

Fills the Atmosphere with Fragrant Aroma

One of the most rapid growing vines known. Under favorable conditions this vine has been known to grow OVER 25 FEET IN A SINGLE WEEK. In a very short space of time indeed the Vine has climbed to a great height, and is covered with IMMENSE FLOWERS, from 5 to 7 inches in diameter. It is, indeed, a great novelty, for, unlike other plants, the flowers OPEN IN THE EVENING, and remain open until about noon the following day. In dull weather they will remain open all day. It is a most INTERESTING SIGHT to watch the opening and closing of the flowers as the clouds appear and disperse. As the upper petals open they give forth the most DELICIOUS ALMOND and Lilac fragrance, and the atmosphere around is full of scented fragrance. It is always the object of favorable comment, and much curiosity is aroused by people passing at night time as to the cause of the charming aroma, frequently stopping in an endeavor to satisfy their curiosity. **PRICE, 19 CTS. packet, two packets for 35 CENTS. POSTPAID.**

WONDERFUL X-RAY TUBE

A wonderful little instrument producing optical illusions both surprising and startling. With it you can see what is apparently the bones of your fingers, the lead in a lead pencil, the interior opening in a pipe stem, and many other similar illusions. **Price 10c, 3 for 25c.**

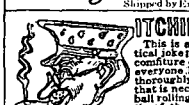
Repeating and Single Shot Air Pistols

Just what you've always wanted. A powerful high grade Air Pistol, shaped like an Automatic, pocket size. Fires B. B. shot obtainable anywhere. Very powerful yet perfectly safe for boys to handle. Two styles—Single Shot Pistol or Repeater. The Repeater fires 100 shots in one loading. The Single Shot Pistol shoots Air Rifle Darts in addition to B. B. Shot. Well made and durable; all metal parts nickel plated; natural grain wood stocks. Front and rear sights. Weighs about 10 ounces. Better than an air rifle. Shipped by Express. Not Prepaid.

PRICES: Single Shot Pistol . . . $2.50
100-Shot Repeating Pistol . . . $5.00

Shoots B. B. Shots

Exploding Matches



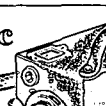
10c

More fun than lighting with your wife. They look just like ordinary matches but explode with a loud bang when lit. 12 matches to a box. **PRICE 10c per box, 3 boxes 25c, or 75c per doz. boxes.** Not malleable. Shipped by Express. Not Prepaid.

Perfume Plant

Blooms only at night, giving forth the most delightful scented fragrance for quite a distance. Causes much comment. For house or garden. Also valuable because of rare perfume made from it. **Seeds, 10c pkt., 3 for 25c**

Kudzu Vine



Most rapid growing vine known. Will grow 20 feet in one week. Luxuriant foliage, lovely purple flowers, very fragrant. Nothing to equal it for shade purposes and quick growth. **Seeds 15c Packet, 3 for 40c. Postpaid.**

BLANK CARTRIDGE PISTOL

Protection against Burglars, Tramps & Dogs

Prices 50c $1.00

Shipped by Express only. Not Prepaid.

Well made and effective; modelled on latest type of Revolver; appearance alone is enough to scare a burglar. When loaded it may be as effective as a real revolver without danger to life. It takes standard .22 Cal. Blank Cartridges obtainable everywhere. **Price 50c, superior quality, $1.00. Blank Cartridges, 50c per 100.** Holster (Cowboy type) for Blank Cartridge Pistol, **50c.** Shipped by Express only.

ITCHING Powder

This is another good practical joke; the intense discomfiture of your victims to everyone but themselves is thoroughly enjoyable. All that is necessary to start the ball rolling is to deposit a little of the powder on a person's hand and the powder can be relied upon to do the rest. The result is a vigorous scratch, then some more scratch, and still some more. **10c box, 3 boxes for 25c or 75c per dozen.** Shipped by Express.

CAMERA with Complete Outfit 35c

(10c extra for postage)

Although this apparatus is so **MARVELOUSLY CHEAP,** it is quite efficient, and will **take SPLENDID PICTURES.** It is just the thing for beginners in photography. It takes pictures not quite 2x1¾ inches with clearness, sharpness and distinctness. Daylight loading. It has a **VERY GOOD LENS; BRILLIANT VIEW FINDER,** a simple yet effective **SHUTTER,** time and instantaneous, leatherette handle, and it comes complete with 4 **FILMS,** 1 package **PRINTING PAPER;** a neat little **PRINTING FRAME** with glass top, and a **SUPPLY OF CHEMICALS** for developing, fixing and turning out the finished picture. Full printed instructions. **CAMERA AND COMPLETE OUTFIT ONLY 35c (Canada and foreign 50c) with 10c extra for postage and packing. Extra FILM 10c per package of 5 Films. Extra Printing Paper 10c pkg.**

LOOK 35¢ LOOK WONDERFUL INSTRUMENT

Greatest thing yet. Nine separate articles in one. Everybody delighted with it. Odd, Curious and interesting. Lots of pleasure as well as very useful.

It is a double Microscope for examining the wonders of nature. It is also an Opera Glass, a Stereoscope, a Burning Lens, a Reading Glass, a Telescope, a Compass, a pocket Mirror, and a Laryngoscope—for examining eye, ear, nose and throat. It is worth all the cost to locate even one painful cinder in the eye. Folds flat and fits the pocket. Something great—you need one. Don't miss it. Sent by mail. **Only 35c or 3 for $1.**

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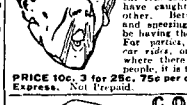


One of these glass vials dropped in a room full of people will cause more consternation than a limburger cheese. The smell entirely disappears in a short time. **10c. per Box, 3 Boxes for 25c., 75c per doz. Boxes, or $7.50 per gross Boxes.** Shipped by Express. Not Prepaid.

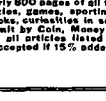
SNEEZING POWDER

Place a very small amount of this powder on the back of your hand and blow it into the air, and watch them sneeze without knowing the reason why. It is most amusing to hear their remarks, as they never suspect the real source, but think they have caught it one from another. Sneezing and sneezing you yourself will be having the time of your life. For parties, political meetings, car rides, or any place at all where there is a gathering of people, it is the *greatest joke out.* **PRICE 10c, 3 for 25c, 75c per dozen. Shipped by Express.** Not Prepaid.

TELL YOUR OWN FORTUNE

With the aid of this dream book and fortune-teller. The key to your future. Will you be lucky in love? Successful in business? Will you be wealthy? Complete with dictionary of dreams with descriptions and correct interpretations, with lucky numbers, fortunate days, oracles, divination, palmistry, etc. **Price 10c postpaid.**

LEARN TO HYPNOTIZE



This book tells how. Explains all about Hypnotism, how to hypnotize, how to produce sleep, how to awaken a subject, how to hypnotize animals, hypnotism in diseases, etc. **ONLY 10c p.p.d.**

STAR TOY MAKER

Tells how to make a Pinhole Camera, a Canoe, model Railroad, a Telephone, Boomerang, Telegraph Instrument, Box Kite, Talking Machine, Microscope, Electric Motor, Electric Door Bell, Water Wheel, Paddle Raft, a pair of Skis, a Dog Sled, Bird House, Rabbit Yard, etc. **PRICE 10c.**

BOYS! THROW YOUR VOICE

Into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends.

THE VENTRILO

a little instrument, fits in the mouth out of sight, used with above for Bird Calls, etc. Anyone can use it. **Never fails. A 16-page course on Ventriloquism together with the Ventrilo. All for 10c postpaid.**

COMICAL MOTTO RINGS

Lots of harmless fun and amusement wearing these rings. Made in platinoid finish (to resemble platinum), with wording on enameled, as illustrated. **Price 25c. ea. Postpaid.**

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64 page book tells how. Gives the meaning of each and every card, how to deal and lay them out. Everything explained in simple language. **10c postpaid.**

PLAY PIANO IN ONE HOUR

With this new VAMPING BOARD. No teacher needed. Surprisingly simple. Place the Vamping Board upright over the piano keys, and vamp away to thousands of songs, ballads, waltzes, foxtrots, rag time, etc. No knowledge of music required. After using it a few times, the Board may be dispensed with entirely. **Price 15c postpaid.**

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An excellent little book containing 250 Parlor Tricks, tricks with cards, coins, handkerchiefs, eggs, rings, glasses, etc. So simple that a child can perform them. Profusely illus. Sent postpd. to any address for only **10c. 3 copies for 25c postpaid.**

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